



Page 1 – NEPHOMANCER’S DEMISE by William Ogden Haynes. Mr. Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He had published several collections of poetry and many of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies. (<http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>)

Page 2 – IT BLOCKED THE LIGHT by Tawny Molina. The author writes, “I am a female horror and sci-fi writer from Florida”

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“NEPHOMANCER’S DEMISE”

by WILLIAM OGDEN HAYNES

Cloud divination, also known as nephomancy, is a captivating practice that involves interpreting the shapes and movement of clouds to gain insight into the future. Medium, September 2023

The storm crept in surreptitiously like a bad habit, coating the road with a thick sheen of ice. Her car, almost imperceptibly, slid to the right and she turned the steering wheel to compensate, but then it slipped to the left. It finally spun around, hurtling backwards down the steep hill between high mounds of snow on each side of the road, pushed there by plows. Now she lies paralyzed next to the wrecked car, looking up at the top of the drift next to her, where the wind has carved a perfect sharp lip of snow, like a breaking wave, curled against the winter storm. And as she lies there under the concrete sky, her blood reddening the fallen white flakes like a snow cone, she turns upward, looking for what shapes the clouds might assume to reveal some sign of her fate. Years ago, as a young girl, the clouds told her she would one day die from drowning, and from that day she stayed away from water. She had always seen the future in cloud formations and hoped today would be no different. Perhaps she would see the Grim Reaper, a

tunnel with a light at the end, or a string of pearls with death as the final bead at the end of the strand. But as hard as she tries, she discerns no pattern. And as her consciousness fades, she realizes that her destiny is not in today’s clouds, but was predicted on a cloudy day long ago when she was a girl. She smiles as she gargles in her own blood, lying next to a snowdrift, that is topped by a frozen cresting wave. ❖

“IT BLOCKED THE LIGHT”

by TAWNY MOLINA

You know there is something really weird about the Sun suddenly vanishing. I'm not talking about having a cloud roll in and cause the sunlight to fade for a few moments. I mean having not only the blue sky blocked but also the clouds. It happened I swear. I was going for a walk and suddenly something blocked everything above my neighborhood.

I want to say it happened sometime around the first day of winter. Winter solstice? I dunno I never really keep track of these things. I only remembered this year because of what happened. It was midday when I was walking down the street and suddenly my neighbor's Christmas lights seemed obnoxiously bright. I'd been staring at the snow-covered sidewalk as I walked, trying to make sure I didn't miss a step and slip and break my ass, again. If you ever lived anywhere with snow, you know landing in that cold shit will ruin your day. Unless you're a kid I was not.

I also wasn't particularly old, so it is not like this was some kinda senile mind fuckery. In my mid-thirties, I'd figured I'd seen enough while walking around the neighborhood to know the regulations on the brightness of Christmas lights. So I was about to look over and possibly complain- yeah, I know what kind of Grinch com-

plaints about Christmas lights, but when you have to deal with them shining in your bedroom window when you have work in the morning. Sorry, I am getting off track.

I look up and notice the Christmas lights aren't any brighter than they were before. It was just darker. Why the fuck was it darker? Did I lose track of time? Had I been abducted by aliens and suddenly it was hours later. I hoped not - my cat would flip out if I was so much as a few minutes late feeding her. I yanked my phone out and... nope 11:45 AM, Sunday. Same day it had been before, just a few minutes since I left my home.

A chill ran down my spine as I looked up at the darkened sky. It wasn't like normal clouds, rolling in and preparing to snow or rain. It was just darkness, like whatever had covered the sky was so big light couldn't seep around the edges. So it wasn't like an unexpected eclipse, you could see the ring of light around this. Oh no, this was something way bigger.

Pressing the keys into the door I looked over my shoulder, but nothing seemed to be there. Of course nothing was behind me, the weirdness was going on above us. I opened the door and quickly locked it behind me, making sure to tuck my keys in my jacket pocket. For some rea-

son, I felt as though it was better to keep them near. The rest of the day seemed to go off without a hitch. It was not till that evening that I started to really question if I was losing my mind.

I went to bed early trying to avoid trying to think of why it was as dark as night outside. I could hear people in and out of their houses, always looking up at where the sun should have been. When night fell even I had gone out to see, but the moon and stars seemed to be gone as well. Like some big curtain had been pulled between us and the rest of the galaxy. I kept checking my phone but there were no emergency alerts and the newscasters on TV just kept talking about how it was probably the Russians. So bed seemed like a fair idea.

I think it must have been about three in the morning when I woke up once more to the odd feeling. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling trying to process why I had woken up. It had been an odd feeling. Like someone had been speaking to me but I had been asleep and unable to actually process what they had been saying. Brushing it off as a bizarre dream I opted to roll on to my side and try to get more rest. We'd be getting emergency alerts if we had to run right? And then it hit again. Words. Some kind of odd foreign language echoing through my home. From outside my home? It seemed to be everywhere.

I climbed to my feet and reached under my bed, pulling free the old baseball bat I'd kept under there. I watched way too many true crime documentaries to not pack something by my bed. I slowly made

my way to my closet, checked, cleared, and onward to the doorway. My home was small, a living room with my bedroom, an extra room I used for an office, a bathroom, and a kitchen that was significantly smaller than any kitchen had any business being. I could see pretty much the entire house from my bedroom door. Just to be sure I checked the other rooms, but the place was empty.

Nothing. Empty. Just me as usual. It was only me here. A high-pitched scream broke my focus. I turned towards it. Was it a woman outside? Fuck. I heard it again. Definitely Linda next door. Did I want to go out there, into that weird night? Unfortunately, my misplaced desire to help got the better of my common sense and I pulled on my boots, threw on my jacket, and ran out in my pajamas.

What welcomed me was nothing like I had ever imagined. The lady next door was screaming at the top of her lungs. Something had landed on her house. A dark pillar, huge, I can't even process how wide it was, but it had crushed most of the old Victorian house Linda lived in. All I could see were bits of wire and wood from where the house had been, sprung up around the base of the pillar, gravestones of the home that once stood there. She went rushing past me, screaming at the top of her lungs. Hysterical. I certainly would have been in a similar mood if some big thing of blackness had simply fallen on my home. She was lucky to be alive. I hoped everyone had gotten out as I moved forward.

I heard it again, the odd language echoing around me. Louder now that I was outside. It was coming from above. From whatever was blocking out the light. It was almost spellbinding, like, I wanted to just stand there and listen. But the hysterical screams of the woman behind me dragged me from the pleasant thoughts of dreaming.

“Oh my God, it’s a leg!”

I turned around as he heard her speak. A leg? This was a leg? How could that be? Nothing could be a leg. The endless pillar that landed on her house went on forever up into the sky. How could it be attached to anything? And then it moved. It slowly lifted up, like an exhausted elephant and vanished up into the sky. The stars and moon suddenly shined again, nearly blinding me in their shocking brilliance, no longer blocked.

I did not know what to do. I turned and went back into my home and laid down. This was too much to process. I eventually fell asleep to the sound of Linda’s screaming and the buzzing of emergency alerts and sirens. ❖

“1962”

by ALYSSA COLTRAIN

It was the kind of wet winter day that only the lake effect could manage— cold that wormed through the seams of jackets and shoes, left gray slush churned up in the corners of parking lots and the edges of walkways. It wasn't crisp or clean or pretty. It made you tired.

Or maybe— and Rizzo did have to admit this— the *being tired* was the two-day hangover being newly 35 seemed to have given him as a birthday gift. A damp blast of gray morning air pushed him towards and then through the entryway.

“Good birthday?” their administrative assistant Jen asked from where she was photocopying setlists.

Rizzo made a noise.

“There coffee?”

Jean gave him an apologetic shrug and a gesture to the oil slick dregs in the pot.

“Guys from corporate are here.”

The conference room was all glass; Rizzo could see his manager and two men in suits poring over an entire tree's worth of paperwork. The nausea might have been the hangover— or not. WEDO was an anomaly, a weird tiny glitch in a big entertainment company's portfolio. Someone had discovered people of a certain age liked nostalgia and consistency

and hated having their worldview threatened. Hence WEDO, an in-character nostalgia station that relived 1962— from the songs and the advertisements to the personas on the air.

But listenership was down, and Rizzo didn't like the implications of corporate's presence.

Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, how you all doing tonight may have been carefully crafted, pompadour and leather jacket and all, but Rizzo had grown fond of the persona whose name he'd taken for himself. His salary was enough to pay his bills, split his rent with his roommates, and put a little away towards the idle dream of a condo in whatever beach town Zillow said was affordable. Sometimes they even let him write his own set as long as he played enough Heavy Rotation.

Today was not one of those days. Jen handed him a list, and he could sing every one of those songs from memory.

The Mr. Coffee beeped to tell him the second pot was ready. He poured a cup, added creamer, and stared at the beige powder as it clumped and refused to dissolve. Time to beat the dead horse again.

“I am sure they played more than 40 songs in 1962,” he said aloud to no one.

Or to Jen, who had heard this argument before, and always had the same answer.

“People listen to Top 40 all the time.”

“We’re not a top 40 station, though!”

Rizzo protested. “And I bet the deep cuts would be a hit. You’ve never heard a song that you haven’t thought about in *years* and then suddenly it takes you back to exactly where you were when you first heard it.”

“I’m not the person you need to have this argument with.”

He’d had the argument with his manager, only to have diminishing listenership cited as a reason not to take risks. Shouldn’t it be the opposite?

“You’re up in ten, by the way,” Jen said.

“You’re a doll; thank you,” he told her and scrambled to the booth.

“And this is Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, how we all doing this afternoon? Nothing like a good slush spray to welcome you to 1962. President Kennedy is addressing Congress this upcoming Thursday. We’ll broadcast live on our partner station WBTY— but for the moment, I’ve got Fats Domino’s Jambalaya to help keep you warm.”

Rizzo cued up the song. Most of the intro had been a lie of course. WBTY existed in 1962, but closed in 1985. But the references made it sound authentic, even if they did dress up the Cuban Missile Crisis as some tongue-in-cheek Halloween nonsense.

He got his first call-in a few hours later, a giggling younger woman who

immediately had Rizzo rolling his eyes.

“So are you not allowed to talk about modern things?”

“Darling, I don’t know what you mean,” he feigned back as he stopped the recording of the call, knowing it wasn’t going on air. “I can talk about anything modern you want— we even got that new Acker Bilk album in. You want me to put on a song for you?”

The album release date was somewhere on the yellowed pieces of paper he’d pinned up— quick references he could make on the fly. He barely used them any more, though; he probably had a better idea of who was on the Ed Sullivan show at any given date in 1962 than what was actually playing in theaters.

“So what’ll you say if I ask you about the Internet?”

“Sorry, doll. Is that Spanish?”

A couple people always called in per shift, wondering if they could get him to break character, violate the fiction that WEDO existed in January 2nd, 1962. Rizzo technically was allowed to say whatever he liked as long as he didn’t air a character breaking call, but it had weirdly become a point of pride to him that he didn’t.

He played “Stranger on the Shore” next anyway since the caller had him thinking about it. He liked the whimsy of Acker Bilk’s vibrato. He fielded another from an older woman who told him what a charming young man he was. She appreciated hearing songs she remembered,

and he was as charming as she expected and played the Patsy Cline song she wanted to hear and told her that she could call in any time.

He was nearing the end of his shift when a final call came in.

“Good afternoon,” said a tenor voice, quiet but with a calm, warm clarity that made Rizzo wonder if he was talking to a trained singer. “Is this WEDO?” He pronounced each letter neatly rather than slurring it into *weedo* like Rizzo and all the other DJs.

“You got Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, live all day— what can I do for you?”

“Would you play Morgan, please? The original.”

“Sure, my man, let’s hear—” and Rizzo was halfway through telling this man with the quiet voice that he could play the song when he realized that he had no idea what Morgan was.

“Happy to play it for you,” he said, but dead air was bad air, and he needed to keep talking as he searched their index. Not a fan of the cover?”

“It’s nothing against Bing Crosby,” the man said. “He does an admirable job, but you can’t compete with Ivo Robic for resonance.”

“Absolutely— Sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Rizzo said. He didn’t even have a chance to ponder how specific a musical observation that was, too busy typing *Ivo Robic* into the artist tab and clicking the *Use WildCards* box for good measure.

“Everett Reid,” said the man at the

exact moment that *Morgen*, a West German hit that had finally broken into the US market at 39 on the Billboard Top 100 in 1959 showed up.

“Let me get that going for you then, man, thanks for calling in!”

Rizzo held his exhale until he knew his mic was no longer live. *Morgen* was apparently in German, so he couldn’t follow the lyrics, but Ivo Robic still had an emotive delivery that he got caught in. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the chair. To be fair to Everett Reid and all his weirdness— he wasn’t wrong at all about the resonance.

Rizzo played *Morgen* again the next day, to the delight of one caller who told him that they hadn’t thought about that song in years. It was the point he’d been trying to make: they didn’t have to play the songs that everyone still remembered. *Morgen* was barely top 40, and they were getting calls about it. Their listeners’ memories were all still there; they just needed the recall cue to bring all of them back to life. Hell, wasn’t that the point of a nostalgia station? To bring back the past?

He was going to beat the dead horse again, but when Rizzo arrived the next day, he didn’t see Jen. The only coffee was blackened dregs from the night before; the only lights on were in the recording booth, and most importantly— they had no setlists. Ryan, the overnight DJ, put on the Chantels’ “Well, I Told You,” as his signoff song, and Rizzo rushed into the booth as soon as the red light turned off.



“Where are the setlists?” he asked without preamble, knowing that they had exactly two minutes and twenty seconds before he had to be live and talking on the air.

“There aren’t any.”

“Jen?”

“Do you read your emails?” Ryan said. “There’s the bridge. You’re on!”

The door clicked shut behind him; Rizzo was in the chair; the headphones shut warm and silent over his ears, and he heard the hum that meant *live air* and—

“How we doing, Toledo, this is WEDO, with Rizzo signing on. Hope you’re—”

Rizzo knew a lot of 1962 history but right now with too much panic and not enough setlist, he couldn’t think of anything besides... terrible German from war movies.

“—having a good morning, or well. Shall I say having a *guten morgen*? From our friends on the best side of the wall, west side of the wall, West Germany, let’s have Morgen!”

The opening chords of the song gave Rizzo a chance to breathe, confirm a few details from *This Day in History*, and start to put together a set list before the phone rang.

“You’re live on WEDO from Toledo, what can I do for you?”

“You seem to be enjoying Morgen.”

What was it about this man’s voice that made him calm down and smile? It had to be just relief; Everett Reid knew music and could fill airtime.

“What can I tell you, Mr. Reid, you

can’t go wrong with anyone they call the Croatian Sinatra. What else can I play for you today?”

“I’d love to hear *It Might as Well Rain Until September*.”

The computer program returned no results once again.

“Not familiar with it,” he said, and tried to keep the ease to his voice, even as he felt the seconds ticking by. It was a long title, sure, but it was all in English.

“Of course you are,” said Everett Reid, and started to sing.

Trained singer, Rizzo thought before correcting himself. A singer with a lot of practice. Everett’s clear tenor voice was on key, with good phrasing and breath control but not the expression he’d expect from a professional. A choir, maybe? His voice wasn’t loud or showy, but— nice. Really nice. Rizzo wouldn’t mind listening a little longer. Maybe paying for the performance with a drink or with dinner.

“Does it ring any bells?”

And while Rizzo had been caught up in a daydream, Morgen had ended. He was eating into his lead time, the beginning of his conversation with Everette playing on the air.

Morgen hadn’t been a song they played routinely. It was top 40, yes, so it showed up in their default filters, but barely. Everett either had a good memory or his own collection of music; this could be another less well-known song.

Rizzo unclicked the *Heavy Rotation* filter and nearly wept when the song showed up.

“Yeah, man, I got it for you. Rain Until September coming right up. You have a hell of a voice, too. Anyone tell you that?”

Maybe he was imagining the hint of pleasure in Everett’s voice, the quiet warmth that softened the next comment into teasing.

“You really ought to know your music better to be a DJ.”

“Maybe I need better callers to keep me on my toes,” Rizzo answered back.

“I’ll take that as a challenge, Rizzo,” Everett said. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

When Rizzo finally actually read his emails, he saw management was cutting costs. The Djs were all responsible for their setlists, and he saw more evidence of Jen than Jen herself: photocopies made, things changed in the breakroom, a note about doing a remote broadcast at the Vale Rio. She’d also forwarded him a Facebook post where someone mentioned their delight at hearing Rain Until September again. That they’d forgotten about it until that morning and then dug out all of their own Carole King albums.

Rizzo took it as permission. He was writing his own set lists anyway, and he got the distinct impression that no one was paying attention. So he played Ivo Robic. He played Carole King. When he got into work early enough, he dug through music recommendation subreddits, looking for deep cuts of artists he knew or anything by artists he didn’t.

He played every single one of Everett’s recommendations, even if he did make him sing a few lines sometimes.

“What can I say? I like your voice.”

“I guessed when you played Beyond the Sea and then told me you didn’t know That’s the Way Love Is. It’s the B-side of the same album,” Everett told him.

“You’ve caught me,” Rizzo said. “Whatever will I do?”

This wasn’t a conversation he was putting on air. Honestly, it didn’t seem like Everett called to hear himself. He’d called to request a song and talk, but that wasn’t uncommon. Some of Rizzo’s listeners had no one else. Friends and family had passed away; others didn’t understand or appreciate the music they loved.

“I guess you have to put on another song for me,” Everett said.

“Your wish is my command.”

“Don’t give me too much leeway. Just for a second Rizzo thought Everett sounded flirtatious. “How about Mambo Inn?”

Rizzo couldn’t stave off the twist of disappointment that all Everett was asking for was a song.

“Mario Bauza, yeah? That’s an old one.”

“Heard him play with Dizzy Gillespie once when I was in college.”

Rizzo had been queueing up the song, but that floored him. How old was Everett that he’d seen Dizzy Gillespie live?

“You heard them play live. When was that? I didn’t even know that they were still doing live shows. Please tell me that’s on YouTube.”

“What?”

And he was supposed to stay in

character, right.

“Right. Sorry. Mambo Inn.”

There was a hesitation on the phone line, the quiet static of dead air.

“Everett, man, you still there?”

“Yeah,” Everett said and when he spoke again this time, Rizzo heard resolve, as if the other man had decided something.

“My friend and I took some recording equipment to the show. If you wanted to hear it, I could lend you the recording.”

“Yes!”

There went any chance of Rizzo playing this cool. He tried to temper his enthusiasm. He didn’t actually know *anything* about Everett besides his fantastic taste in music and voice that Rizzo could listen to— and at this point had listened to— for hours.

“We’re doing a remote broadcast at the Vale-Rio Diner next week, actually.” Rizzo tried to sound cool. “You could bring it by, if you wanted.”

“I’d like that,” Everett said.

Whatever chance Rizzo had of being casual failed around the time he conditioned his leather jacket. Yes, it was February. The material was starting to wear. Anyone showing up would expect to see *Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo*— leather jacket and pompadour on point.

It was absolutely not why he was doing it.

It wasn’t even about the show recording, though he’d trawled through subreddits and forums. No one had *ever*

heard of Dizzy Gillespie doing live shows in the 80s and 90s, let alone with Mario Bauza. What magic private booking that Everett lucked into?

Okay, it wasn’t just about the recording.

He checked his pompadour in the mirror before heading downstairs to the van. It was going to be a nearly all-day affair; he was handling the set-up and breakdown, but still, Rizzo was excited. This was going to be good.

It was not.

The Vale Rio had set up space heaters in the parking lot, but it was still late February in Ohio. Even a warm day meant Rizzo was rednosed and huddling in that freshly conditioned leather jacket by the end of it.

It had been successful as far as corporate was concerned. People had come out— some who had lived through the time period, others who remembered this music as what their parents and grandparents had listened to. More than one had liked the new playlists, and Rizzo had been certain to ask them to email the station.

Still, it didn’t feel like a victory when he kept trying to match faces to a clear tenor voice that he’d only heard on the phone. It didn’t feel like a victory when his longest conversation was with an older man who told him about growing up going to Toledo’s dance halls back when that was a thing that Toledo had, having seen Cab Calloway touring when Dizzy Gillespie was still playing for the band leader.

It was where the old man who had once been a young man had met his wife. He'd bought her wine coolers, two for a dollar, at the dance hall's tiny bar, and impressed her with being able to do three chained spins. The way he spoke made it clear that she wasn't around any more, that he was running out of people to tell this story to, ways to keep her alive.

It was a kind of quiet desperation that left Rizzo struggling to be *Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, how we all doing tonight*. He played Morgen again, but the whimsy and joy in Ivo Robic's vibrato didn't resonate this time. By the last hour, Rizzo's feet had gone numb, and even he couldn't delude himself into thinking that Everett was coming.

He put on *Concierto de Aranjuez* and *Solea* back to back, not because he liked *Sketches of Spain*—of course he did, what self-respecting DJ *didn't* like *Sketches of Spain*—but because they meant he only had to do one song introduction before switching it back to Ryan at the studio.

He could feel his phone buzzing with texted remonstrations for sticking Ryan with all of the top of the hour “news” and commercials, but Rizzo was starting to lose feeling in his face. He still had to pack up the equipment, drive it all back, and finally go home.

He fell asleep without washing the gel out of his hair, staring at his phone in the darkness as he looked at condos he could never afford.

Everett didn't call. Rizzo pretended he

didn't care. He could make his own set lists. He trawled Reddit and music forums with the best of them, stitching together forgotten favorites and comfortable classics, double-checking the history websites he used to make the broadcasts seem real—what products to mention, what news to do. He was fine. Getting his feelings hurt because some guy he'd never seen in person hadn't shown up to a remote was ridiculous.

Jen sent him an email saying listenership was up, and she'd sent one of his sound checks up to corporate. People wrote in, remembering the last time they'd heard a given song. He started emailing back, asking what else they wanted to hear. The Vale Rio even wanted to do another remote.

“Well all you lucky listeners who want another piece of me will be getting your chance,” he announced once they'd finalized the details. “The Vale Rio's having us back to celebrate St. Paddy's Day. I'll have to see what I can do about finding something green that works with this jacket.”

The phone board lit up again. Rizzo started up *Midnight in Moscow*, one of the songs that a visitor to their Facebook page had requested, before answering it.

“You've got Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, what can I do for you?”

“Why are you doing this?”

That clear tenor had turned sharp as a knife. Everett's voice was vibrating with something that verged on pain.

“I—what?”

“Don’t be precious.”

People talked about callers getting obsessed with DJs, but that happened with big radio stations and actual local celebrities, not tiny anachronisms that only existed so someone could claim a diverse portfolio of stations.

“Everett, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The Vale Rio.” Everett’s voice dripped sarcasm. “Over on Bancroft, makes a mean chicken liver on toast?”

“Why am I doing another remote? It’s my fucking job.”

Rizzo was not concerned about his language or how gross chicken liver on toast sounded, frankly. This call wasn’t ever going on air.

“Except you didn’t do any remote there.”

Oh. Everett was a lunatic.

“Look, man, I don’t know if you went to the wrong—”

“Stop lying!”

“I’m not lying! I was there! You weren’t, and fuck me, I guess for hoping the random guy with the cute voice would show up, but—”

“I was there! I waited. I even asked the waitress; she’d never heard of you, and *you* need to be more careful with what you say on recorded lines.”

“Because I said you had a cute voice?” Lunatic, stalker, bigot, well-intentioned idiot. Rizzo needed just one more for a full house of bullshit. “It is the 21st century; no one’s listening to these anyway and—”

“It’s the...what?”

Everett sounded confused; the shift was frustrating. Rizzo wanted to fight, and Everett had stopped obliging him.

“Earth to Everett, it’s the year of our Lord 2023,” Rizzo snapped. “So unless you’re going to—”

“Rizzo,” Everett said. “It’s 1962.”

Rizzo was going to hope his bosses didn’t see the complaints about the twenty minutes of dead air or accepted some excuse about glitchy equipment and didn’t fire him.

Especially not now.

He hadn’t believed Everett at first. He’d called him some nasty and uncharitable names, but the other man had persisted— after making him explain what a catfish had to do with anything. Which had required an explanation of dating apps, and no one not *actually* from 1962 would have said “magic radio lonely hearts ads” quite so many times.

Everett talked about details of his life with such distinct and specific detail that Rizzo eventually had to believe him. He worked as an accountant for Owens Corning; he sang in a choir in First Congregational, and remembered his father telling him stories about the old church that burned down in a gas explosion thirty five years ago. He had gone to NYU to study accounting, but took as many classes in music as he could. It was why he’d had the recording of Gillespie and Bauza. He insisted people voluntarily ate chicken liver on toast.

“I don’t think it was ever formally

recorded,” Everett had said about the Gillespie/Bauza gig. “David— a friend— and I took the recording equipment from the music department and brought it eighty blocks downtown in the middle of the night because we’d heard Dizzy Gillespie was playing a gig.”

“Well that’s fucking impressive,” Rizzo had said.

“Maybe I was hoping to impress you,” Everett had said before making an obvious excuse and getting off the phone.

The next day, Everett called back.

“This is strange,” he said. “When did you say it was again?”

“March 10th, 2023,” Rizzo answered. “And it’s—”

“March 10th, 1962,” Everett answered. “I don’t understand how any of this works. Why are you talking about my news? Or playing Dizzy Gillespie instead of...modern music, I guess?”

“None of it is half as good as Dizzy,” Rizzo said. “I’d play you some, but the phone would ruin it. And we recycle the news from—”

From newspaper articles, Wikipedia, Reddit, history websites, but Everett was living it.

“They’re going to kill Kennedy,” Rizzo said abruptly. It wasn’t the history he knew intimately; Kennedy died in 1963, but he knew it. “He goes on tour in Dallas, and there’s a man standing in the window of a book repository with a rifle. His name is—”

“Stop. Rizzo, stop.” Everett sounded

panicked.

“What? Everett, you could—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I can’t do anything. If I start talking about someone shooting the president, people will think I’m crazy.”

“And?”

“And that would be dangerous for me.”

Everything that Everett had said the night before made terrible sense. The joy of kinship, however, was outweighed by the reality. 1962. Rizzo wanted to keep talking and promise things would get better, but the truth was if Everett had gone to college when Dizzy Gillespie was playing Harlem clubs, he’d live just long enough to see nearly everyone like him die.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I really am, Everett.”

“Are you angry?” Everett said.

“I’m not, and I’ve got to go, but call me tomorrow, okay?” Rizzo pulled up the setlist, knowing the time he had fought them was running out. “And Everett? Me too.”

The next day, Everett told Rizzo about NYU, about studying accounting but wanting to be a singer.

“You ever get up and sing in one of those clubs?” Rizzo asked.

“Once or twice,” Everett said. “Had to be pretty tipsy to get over the stage fright.”

“Would you sing for me?”

Rizzo had heard Everett sing. He was expecting jazz, swing, maybe Elvis Presley? He wasn’t expecting Everett’s clear tenor to ring out into *Amazing Grace*. It was warm and carried, each note as full and long as it

should have been. Rizzo Rizzo wasn't going to fall in love with someone's singing, but all the same, he liked the sound of Everett's voice.

"You could have been a jazz singer," Rizzo said.

He could hear the pleasure in Everett's laugh, the warmth as he sang a few lines of scat.

"Listen to you go!"

"Now you're just—"

"Flirting?" Rizzo completed the sentence and knew that he'd overstepped. Everett might be like him, but they lived in different times.

"I should go," Everett said.

"I'm sorry," Rizzo said.

"No. It's— I'll call back."

Everett didn't call back. Not for a few days.

"Will you tell me about your boyfriends, Rizz?" he asked when he finally did.

Rizz. Rizzo liked the sound of it on Everett's mouth even if he sounded subdued.

"You make it sound like I've had a wild life," Rizzo teased.

"Will you tell me anyway?" Everett asked, and there was a sadness to his voice that made Rizzo willing to do anything the man asked.

"Not seeing anyone right now. Had a fling last year, but it wasn't anything serious," Rizzo said.

He told him about the fling anyway, about going to queer clubs in Cleveland

and Cincinnati and sometimes even driving over the state line into Pittsburgh. He told him about the boy he thought he was going to marry when he graduated college and the condo they were going to buy somewhere warm.

"Unless a lot changes in the next sixty years, Toledo's not warm," Everett said.

"Toledo is not warm, and I'm not married."

"But you could have been."

Rizzo was tempted to laugh it off. *I know, what a drag, right?* But Everett deserved better than a joke about Rizzo's ex-boyfriend.

"Yeah. Yeah we could have been."

Rizzo had done some Googling since they'd talked, and reading about time travel paradoxes had given him a three day migraine.

"How do you hear this station?"

"When I'm not calling in? I have a radio in my kitchen. Found it when I was making dinner one day."

"Ever tried to call me from a pay phone? Or tune another radio to this station?"

"No," Everett said. "If I wasn't in some store with a radio on display, it would be in the break room at Owens Corning. Or my family's house."

"I wonder if those would work," Rizzo said. He could feel the time-travel-paradox headache coming on, but he was curious. He leaned back on his chair, phone against one ear, feet propped on six square inches of clear desk space.

Everett didn't answer.

“Everett?”

“Why? So I can put my sister on the phone and she can tell you about her baby? Or the other accountants at my job? They think Ivo Robic’s some communist, but you can all laugh about whatever the Blue Jays are up to. I’m sure you can Goodle the scores, whatever that word you keep saying means.”

Rizzo hadn’t meant an idle curiosity to trigger this. He took his feet off the desk as if that had somehow been the cause.

“Everett,” he said. “It’s okay. I was just wondering.”

“I’m sorry.” Everett’s voice was quiet and ashamed. “I just don’t want to share this. You’re the only person I can talk to about music. Even if anyone at my work cared, I get nervous about remembering which club I can say I’ve been to.”

Rizzo wanted to do more than just talk, but what else could he do?

“I’ve got you, okay?” he said. “You know when I’m on. Just call, Everett. I may have to cue up a set, but I’m here.”

“I could help you with them,” Everett offered and Rizzo could have cried at the trace of joy that had crept back into his voice.

“You’re my lifeline,” he said.

“No,” Everett answered. “You’re mine.”

Everett did call, and it became a comfortable thing. Everett came up with song after song while Rizzo thought through space for ads, blurbs, station branding.

“No one is going to know that,” Rizzo

protested once. “I don’t even know it.”

“How?” Everett protested and sang a few bars.

“Unfair. You know I’ll play anything if you sing.”

“Oh, I do.”

Something fluttered in Rizzo’s chest when the other man flirted back. He wasn’t going to fall in love with a man because he’d heard him sing. And he also wasn’t going to call someone he could only talk to *his boyfriend*. But Everett mattered in a way that kept Rizzo in the DJ booth until his replacement pounded on the door, kept him wondering where he was or what he was doing.

He would lay in bed and look at condos and wonder about what beach towns were nice in 1962. If Fire Island or Rehoboth Beach were still— already?— safe havens. Once, he tried to find lottery numbers from 1962 only to discover the newspaper archives were stored on unindexed microfiche somewhere in the public library, accessible only to researchers who submitted a formal request. Rizzo presumed *I want to help an accountant from 1962 win the lottery so he can move back to New York* was not an acceptable research proposal. Even then, he knew it wouldn’t keep Everett safe or guarantee his happiness.

So they kept talking. Rizzo built lists; Everett sang.

Management eventually realized that Rizzo wasn’t following their setlist guidelines, but Jen pulled listenership reports and showed that Rizzo drew more

listeners than any other host.

This is what you use when you ask for a raise, Jen told him in an email forwarding him the listenership reports.

Summer came brief but glorious. The warmth kept Rizzo on Zillow, scrolling through condos overlooking cool ocean water. He wondered where people went on vacation in 1962. Toledo was on Lake Erie, but Everett must have been to the ocean. Coney Island, Long Island, the northern New Jersey shores were an easy train or bus ride away from NYU even in 1962.

When he asked, Everett told him about Coney Island and Lake Erie, hot dogs and ice cream and impossibly blue skies. He'd liked Niagara Falls the best, though, standing by the railing and watching the mist catch the colors out of the light.

"Ever thought of moving somewhere?"

"What would it change besides the weather?"

"Snow's terrible, Everett," Rizzo deadpanned. "And at least New York has clubs to go with the snow."

"Toledo has snow, sure. But it has my job and my family and you, Rizz. And this year's been easier with someone to talk to."

Rizzo wasn't even thinking about their stupid Halloween event until he got into work.

Nostalgia radio was hard. History was made of traumatic events people didn't want to remember, after all. 1962 had the general looming threat of the Cold War, but was otherwise quiet with the marked

exception of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Rather than find another year with its own issues, WEDO management had opted for a schlocky take that took all of the teeth out of it. Most radio stations decorated for Halloween with pumpkins and bats and witches. WEDO put up the hammer and sickles.

The broadcast was playing in the station.

"And for those of you still alive, remember that *Ne strelyay, tovarishch!* is Russian for 'please don't shoot me, comrade.'"

Rizzo spoke no Russian, but the way Ryan said it, each syllable independently articulated made it clear he was reading off Google Translate.

"Good afternoon and good luck, folks. I'll see you tomorrow. If there is one."

Rizzo rolled his eyes as he made his way to the booth. It was a colossal waste of airtime. WEDO could have just ignored it. Or played it straight and dealt with someone maybe getting upset. The ridiculous version they did now was the worst of both—

Everett had to be terrified. For a moment that made his blood pressure spike, Rizzo remembered being a kid watching towers burn on TV and wondering if the world was ending too.

"Hey, Rizz," Ryan said as he left the booth.

Rizzo brushed past him. If he knocked into him, it wasn't entirely unintentional.

"Hey!" Ryan protested after him.

Rizzo gritted his teeth and ignored

him. Ryan had done his show how management wanted. Hell, it was how Rizzo had done it last year.

The Chantels were already singing “Well, I Told You” when the headphones closed over Rizzo’s ears. He stared at the gray soundproof walls of the booth and Russian phrases Ryan had pinned up. *Engels is my favorite communist* read the next one, and next to it was an old map of Toledo with *fallout shelter packing tips* scrawled on it.

The Chantels were winding down. Like hell Rizzo was doing any of that.

“This is Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo, folks, and I know we’re all just a little apprehensive today. We’ve got your back. Stay close to your families and we’ll stay right here, too. Here’s Morgen, folks.”

Through the glass of the booth, Rizzo could see Ryan staring quizzically at him before shrugging and walking away.

Rizzo played his set straight, frantically researching the exact details of the Cuban missile crisis in a way that he’d never needed to with the schlock. He’d always just faked this part. He’d never needed to *report*.

He kept the phone line open. When Sara M. from Hopewell Heights complained how he wasn’t being funny, he hung up on her.

Everett didn’t call.

Rizzo started improvising. First he played songs that he knew Everett liked. When the phone line stayed quiet, he started to play songs he knew Everett hated. He wanted a reaction, even if it was

just to call Stan Kenton “a talentless fool hack riding on the coattails of a band better than he deserved.”

At some point, Jen texted him about odd seconds of dead air, and really, was the Halloween coverage the hill he wanted to die on?

Rizzo ignored the text, and Everett didn’t call.

It wasn’t until near the end of Rizzo’s shift— when the gray Toledo fall day had faded into darkness somewhere outside the unnatural fluorescent lights of the booth— that the phone finally rang.

“Hey, you’ve got Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo.”

“Rizz.”

Everett’s voice was worn and quiet. The burst of relief in his chest made Rizzo nearly sob.

“Are you okay? You didn’t call.”

“I’ve been at my sister’s all day. She didn’t want me to go home, but I couldn’t call you from her place.”

They knew so little about this. Everett hadn’t dared calling from any phone but his own or calling any DJ but Rizzo. Rizzo had stopped asking.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead. “I know you don’t want me to tell you what happens.”

“I’ll make an exception.”

“It’s nothing,” Rizzo said. “It’s nothing, I promise you. There’s a bunch of saber rattling and things get scary, but in the end, Kruschev blinks, Everett. He pulls the missiles out of Cuba, and it’s nothing.”

“You don’t have a Russian accent,”

Everett said. He was still so quiet and drawn that Rizzo couldn't tell if he was joking. "Then again, you've told me this is a nostalgia station and you play a character. How do I know?"

"I wouldn't lie," Rizzo said. "Do you want to know the name of every president from 1962 until now? I'll have to Google it, but you know I'm not bright enough to make up that many names."

"No. Either I believe you or I don't. And if I start not believing you, I'm really going crazy."

"You're not crazy," Rizzo said. "But you sound tired as hell."

"My sister's anxious, so her kids won't stop fussing. Spent most of the night singing them to sleep."

"Guess I'm not the only one who likes your voice then."

"You certainly monopolize it enough."

Everett's voice was fond, and Rizzo realized this was what the other man had called for, more than a list of presidents or assurances that the world wasn't ending. He wanted the normal they had found over the past months.

"Glad you missed the start of my set," Rizzo said. "I started playing songs you hated, just to get you to call. Even played Stan Kenton."

"You didn't."

"I absolutely did."

"Kenton is such a waste. That band deserves better than him."

"You see how wild I get without you to keep me in line?" Rizzo could breathe now, enough to start taking down and

systematically ripping up Ryan's Russian phrase list.

"Soon you'll start playing music from the 70s and get yourself fired."

"Hey, musically, I think you'll like the 70s. There's a lot of great harmonies—check out the Commodores. *Easy's* popular, but it's popular for a reason."

"Sounds tempting."

The silence felt less strained. Rizzo started tearing up the fallout packing tips.

"Rizz."

"Yeah."

"Would you sing it for me?"

"You do not want to hear me sing," Rizzo answered. "I have a terrible voice."

"Just humor me? Like to have something else to think about."

That was the reality of it: Everett trapped in what felt like the slow burning prelude of apocalypse. But Everett had said *You're my lifeline*, so what else could Rizzo do but sing?

He didn't have a great voice, and he'd picked a song that he thought Everett would like, not one that suited his limited range. His voice cracked on the high notes; he couldn't hold the long notes anywhere near as long as they needed. He reached for the paper shreds uncomfortably as soon as he'd finished.

"Looking forward to hearing that," Everett.

"I told you my voice was terrible." Rizzo protested. "I promise Lionel Ritchie does it better."

"I'm looking forward to hearing it because it'll make me think about you."

Rizzo wasn't going to fall in love with someone because he heard them sing. But maybe he'd fall in love after singing for them.

WEDO had gotten complaints— and Rizzo went to war. He found the complainers' email addresses, compared them to previous listener emails, and pointed out that these were people who apparently tuned in *only* for their Hammer & Sickle Halloween.

"No one alive then thought this was a joke," he told his boss. "A lot of our listeners don't have anyone else, and I'd rather honor them than these yahoos."

Jen emailed him that evening.

You're dying on the hill of the Cuban missile crisis?

Rizzo didn't tell Jen why. It may have been less dangerous, but he also didn't want to sound like a lunatic either. And he didn't tell Everett that he loved him.

But he did sing for him more often.

Rizzo took shifts the other DJs didn't want: the Wednesday before Thanksgiving itself. He'd offered to take Christmas Eve when Jen emailed him again.

You know this place isn't gonna love you back, right? They're considering selling. Profits still aren't good enough.

Rizzo couldn't shake the quiet panic that consumed him after that. Even Everett noticed.

"Rizz, what's got you so quiet? You talk for a living."

What if I can't be your lifeline? But he

didn't want to worry Everett when their opportunities to talk came less frequently with the holidays and family obligations.

So he didn't take the Christmas Eve shift. Instead, he drove three hours north to Saint Joseph, Michigan, which was Toledo but even colder, and while his mom and his father bickered about the temperature of the ham, he found himself staring at his savings account.

He hadn't realized how much was there. Rizzo rarely listened to his father, to be honest, but he'd listened when he'd said to set up an automatic deposit and then stop thinking about it. It was enough for his idle searches on Zillow to feel less ridiculous. It might be enough for a down payment.

Or maybe for part ownership of a radio station.

Rizzo didn't even know how much radio stations cost. Did you buy the station designation? Was that allocated to you? Did you buy the antenna? Lease? But the idea felt exciting and possible: making new set lists, changing their Halloween event, expanding remotes for all of their listeners— the oldest and the newest.

He sent an inquiry to his bank from his phone while the bickering turned to who had forgotten to get the rolls out of the freezer.

Apparently no one wanted to do *anything* between Christmas and New Year's, certainly not talk to a nostalgia DJ with some money to put down but nothing as collateral. Every time he had tempted to Google whether or not he had any chance

at this, he hesitated. It was a fantasy, and if reality was unkind, he'd find out eventually anyway.

He still hadn't heard back, and had nothing to tell Everett when he went back to work. He started Morgen as he sipped his coffee, assembling the set list on instinct, deep cuts mixed in with corporate's heavy rotation. He checked WEDO's Facebook page and added a few more songs that listeners had been discussing over the holidays. It was a weekday; he wasn't expecting to hear from Everett until near the end of his shift, but he still found himself smiling when the phone rang.

"Good afternoon," said a tenor voice, quiet but with that clarity that Rizzo had gotten so attached to. "Is this WEDO?"

He pronounced each letter neatly rather than slurring it into *weedo* as Rizzo and the other DJs did. Rizzo had never gotten him to say it that way; Everett thought it sounded silly.

"Nah, Everett, you've reached the White House," he teased. "How was your New Year's? Did you go to your sister's?"

"I'm sorry?"

Everett's voice had gone flat. It left Rizzo stumbling.

"Is your phone acting up again? I just asked how you were doing; I missed talking to you—"

"I think you must have me mistaken for someone else."

"No. You're— what are you talking about? You're Everett Reid; you work at Owens Corning as accountant and sing in

the choir at your church, and you have a vinyl of Dizzy Gillespie riffing with Mario Bauza that you and David recorded at a club in Greenwich—"

"I'm very sure you have the wrong person. Or at the very least, I do." The voice had gone from flat to something edged with *panic*. "My apologies. Have a good afternoon."

Any protest Rizzo could add was already too late. He could hear the dead hum of the phone line. Everett had hung up.

Ten minutes of dead air followed. Rizzo regretted every time he'd acceded to Everett not wanting to think about how this worked. He had no idea how to call him back. It wasn't until Jen had texted him ?????? that he'd kept broadcasting on autopilot.

He played WEDO's heavy rotation with clinical perfection the rest of the afternoon. He played it the next day and the one after that. At some point, his bank called, and he let it go to voicemail. Even if he might have considered part ownership outside of Everett, his head was full of static, the dead tone of a phone after one party had hung up.

He finally caught himself staring at the yellowed pieces of paper he'd pinned to the inside of the DJ booth three years ago, when he'd first started this job: when albums had launched, significant appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show, local history.

January 7th, 1962, Ed Sull live Moulin

Rouge, Hollywood.

He'd never thought about it. Last New Year's Day, Rizzo had been newly 35, and for WEDO, it had been 1962. This year he was newly 36, and for WEDO, it was still 1962.

Rizzo didn't have enough battery in his phone or cells in his brain for temporal metaphysics, but the pattern was horrifically clear.

The phone rang.

"Hey, you've got Rizzo with WEDO from Toledo."

"Hi."

That quiet tenor voice was as closed off as ever. Rizzo remembered it from when Everett was still on his guard, before Rizzo had gotten him to sing. Before he'd sang *for* him.

"Hi Everett."

You're my lifeline, this man had told him in a 1962 summer that hadn't happened yet.

"You're still talking like you know me."

Rizzo made a decision, and his fingers put on *Morgen* without thinking about it.

"Yeah," he said. "I know that was weird, but Everett?"

"Yes?"

"It's really nice to hear from you." ❖

“LITTLE GLASS BIRDS”

by COLBY WOODLAND

Clyde woke up with his heart in his throat. The sound of a desperate, bloody cry for help reverberated his trailer. The scream was followed by a heavy crash that shook the cheap panel walls. *The kitchen.* Jetting out of bed, he didn't concern himself with the whys and hows of the situation, only with moving the aging, scar tissue-ridden mass that was his body toward the sound of his child's cries as fast as he could. Grabbing his service pistol from a drawer, he turned quickly into the room where the sobs were coming from. His pupils widened as he saw his 10 year-old baby girl keeled over, with her knees tucked into her chest, and auburn hair covering her tears. Clyde dropped to his knees instantly and began cradling his daughter, causing a sharp pain to attack his left knee.

“Macy!” his voice cracked with fear. Clyde tried his best to tactically assess the situation despite the heaving in his chest. “What happened?”

He was out of breath and felt a tinge of shame for not maintaining the fitness he once prided himself in during his tours of duty. He saw the door to the yard was shut and found no intruder. His daughter, from what he could tell, maintained the expected number of fingers and toes.

She looked up at him with damp eyes. “I burnt myself,” she whimpered.

She opened her clenched fist to reveal her palm a soft hue of pink. Clyde finally let go of his breath, and as his senses relaxed. His eyes fell immediately to a tipped over cast-iron skillet on the floor and a surrounding graveyard of bacon and eggs.

The father rubbed his temple with his trembling hand. “Macy, what the *hell* is the matter with you?” he asked. He regretted his language, but was still aware of his duty as a father to turn this into a teaching moment. “You know better than to try and cook on your own.”

Macy darted her eyes away from him. She choked back the tears her father taught to never show. “I wanted to make you breakfast for our last day together.” Her frustration with herself became apparent in her voice. “I help Grandma make breakfast now, you know. I can pretty much do it on my own.” Clyde could see that her hand was hurt, but her pride may have taken the greater burn. “But I stepped on Tiny when I was cooking,” she continued. “And he scared me, and I grabbed the stove, and it burned me and I-I-”

“-Shhh” Clyde interrupted her. “It’s

okay, sweetheart.” He sighed, and shot a side-eye to the fat orange cat perched defensively in the corner of the room. “But since you dropped all of our breakfast, we might have to eat Tiny now.”

Macy let a small giggle between tears and then paused for a moment. “It wasn’t his fault, I-” she paused, finding the right phrase, “*should have paid attention to my surroundings.*” Macy had said this like she was proudly reciting an oath, an oath specifically preached to her by her father.

“That’s right, Macy.” Clyde gave her a small smile and moved his attention to his knee, and massaged an area marked by faded scar. “Always be aware of your surroundings.” He pulled her closer. “Now let’s clean this up, go grab some breakfast, and get you to grandmas, yeah?”

#

The Sunflower Inn was a storied establishment in their town. Clyde had long been trying to curb the habit of eating greasy food, but he couldn’t help the nostalgic wave that washed over him when he bit into a strip of grease bathed bacon. When he was a kid, this beautiful piece of Americana was a tradition for his brother, and his brother’s best friend Freddy. The pair of teenagers were like gods to Clyde, so any food they claimed was good, maybe despite better reasoning, *must* be good.

The restaurant had seen him from child to man. No longer was he a mud-encrusted kid with unkempt hair, spilling his orange juice into the aged leather of the booth, but now a man of 34. He didn’t keep his military haircut after being

discharged, but rather opted for something resembling a mullet, but with a little more respectability. His late wife always loved his hair, and keeping it that way was a half-baked way to remember her.

He considered himself lucky when he looked at his friends and colleagues and saw their hairline retreating backwards. He had his Grandpa Dan to thank for his youthfully intact head of hair. He also had Grandpa Dan to thank for his stature, inheriting his broad shoulders and long legs. All the girls would always joke he had better legs than they did.

After inhaling a plate of thick sausage gravy poured over buttermilk biscuits, Clyde and Macy climbed into his rusted red pick-up truck and began their drive without a word. The only sound in the cabin of the truck was the asphalt underneath the worn tires. Clyde’s gaze kept falling on his daughter, sitting there silently with a look of solemnity beyond her years. Her empty eyes telling her father more than her mouth knew how. The same eyes her mother had when he left to fight a strange war on a strange world when he was still just a boy. In an awkward attempt to ease the melancholy, Clyde searched for something to say to Macy, no matter if she was truly interested or not.

“You know this one of the last trucks to ever take biofuel?” Clyde waited for a response and got none. “After 2097 they passed a law saying the people who make the cars can only build them if they use electricity.” Macy seemed less interested in the conversation now than the lack of one

before. “But.. um, some commercial vehicles can still use gasoline. Like some of the one’s I drive on other planets.” Clyde should have known a discussion about fuel sources probably wasn’t going to get the preteen talking.

He dug deep. “You know this was the truck I took your mom on our first date in? She sat right where you are.” Clyde regretted speaking as soon as he did, what was once an awkward silence with Macy now turned into a painful one.

They had rarely talked about her mother. It was hard enough for Clyde to explain to her that she had passed away due to an infection caused by childbirth, but he believed if Macy was to ever deal with it proper, it was best to learn while she was young, and she was getting old enough to put together that they weren’t a typical family. She had taken the news at first with childlike naivety, not fully understanding what everything meant. But as she grew older the questions went from “is Mommy watching us?” to “would Mom still be alive if it wasn’t for me?” Clyde did his best to answer these inquiries, but every answer he gave seemed to sow more seeds of guilt within Macy’s consciousness.

He wanted to tell her the whole story. That it had been due to a drug addiction that her mother’s immune system was weak. That Clyde blamed himself for leaving her mother to chase glory, pushing her to find solace from his absence in a needle. That Clyde came home a different man, and found a different woman. That he thought making her a mother would fix

her, would save her. That Macy, herself, had barely escaped sharing her mother’s fate. But Clyde was not equipped with the skills to tackle that himself, let alone when Macy was still wrapping her head around her mother’s death.

One heartbreak at a time, Clyde told himself.

He turned off the asphalt road and onto gravel, the traditional marker of “almost at Grandma’s” that would probably be celebratory for a normal child, but all it symbolized for Macy was the 2-minute warning of her father’s departure. The farmhouse they were bound for wasn’t a particularly luxurious stay. His mother was born into a family of old souls who did their damndest to keep the old ways alive. Hell, it took Clyde till he was 25 years-old to convince her to stop using compact discs for music. He was glad his mother wanted a role in his daughter’s life. As much as they argued, they were the only family each other had.

Clyde stopped the truck in his mother’s driveway, and the pair sat in silence for a moment. The rumble of the engine died down, and Macy spoke up with a shaky voice.

“Why can’t you do something else?”

Clyde was caught off guard and struggled to find the words. “Macy, I- “

“There’s plenty of delivery man jobs on Earth,” Macy interrupted. “Becca’s dad delivers things for a big company, and her brother delivers pizzas.”

Clyde thought himself able to explain a lot of things to his daughter; why the birds

sing, why it rains, even why bad things happen to good people, but the intricacies of the interplanetary courier business, and the market that goes along with it, was something he himself did not even fully grasp.

“I make a lot more money doing this kind of work, Macy,” Clyde explained.

It was true, though “a lot” when relative to other courier services was still barely more than a livable wage. AI piloted delivery services had cornered the market to the point where the only jobs available to humans were few and far in-between. With those jobs that remained being ones that involved packages or a delivery location that often came with certain dangers, whether they be physical or legal.

Suddenly the truck’s windows were attacked on both flanks, the right by a large shepherd-mix, and the other by a golden retriever. This ambush sent the orange cat Macy had been holding into a fury in her lap, causing the girl to let out a sharp yelp.

“Spike!” A shrill voice called to the dogs surrounding the truck. “Jet! Get the hell down from there!” The hounds retreated from their advance, and Macy quickly flung open the truck door and followed on their heels towards the older woman who had yelled for the dogs, as her cat cowered on the floorboard of the truck.

“Gramma!” Macy yelled as the elderly woman embraced her.

Clyde breathed deep as he stewed in the driver’s seat of his truck. He knew he had to be polite, he knew he had to be

gentle, so long as Macy could hear them talk. He knew his mother knew that too. He gripped the door handle and swung his legs out of the truck. As his boots hit the ground, he averted his eyes from the woman in front of him. She was much shorter than Clyde. Her gray hair was half in her face, and half tied back. She had athletic lean to her, no doubt built by years of labor. However, it was the years of motherhood that sharpened her eyes with caution.

When he was young, Clyde remembered how his mother would dress up for special occasions, and she always seemed like a different woman. She seemed to carry herself with an importance that was lost in the home. A decorum that was only found at church potlucks and parent-teacher conferences. The last time he could remember seeing her like that was the memorial service for his brother.

“Momma,” Clyde attempted some pleasantries. “How ya been?”

Clyde’s mother looked up from Macy, as her gaze fell on him, her smile shrunk and her eyes narrowed, “I’ve been well, Junior.” She looked back down at Macy, “but I’m a lot better now that I got my little farmhand.” She leaned down and kissed Macy’s rusty curls.

Clyde ran his eyes across the “farm” around him. He would not use that word to describe what he saw: a sea of brown, dead grass, a handful of mismatched hens, and one dairy cow that looked like she had barely enough food in her belly to live a day longer, never mind being able to

provide milk. Though, Clyde supposed, it didn't really need to be much of a farm. After all, to his mother the animals were merely a hobby, a way to pass the time until her late husband's check came in the mail from the military.

She pointed a bony finger towards the truck. "Why don't you grab that little orange bowling ball and go unpack, Macy."

The girl turned back to the truck and saw the dogs harassing her cat through the truck windows.

"Don't worry Tiny, I'll save you," she laughed as she ran back towards the pickup.

Clyde's mother watched Macy run out of earshot and turned coldly to her son, "I suppose you won't make it back in time for Christmas then?"

Clyde avoided eye contact. "I'll try. If there's any jobs going to a lunar city." He spit his tobacco on the ground. "More than likely, they're taken already. Worst case I'll get sent to some Jovian shit hole."

"Oh good." Her nostrils flared. "You'll miss Christmas *and* her birthday."

Clyde shook his head in frustration.

"You know, Junior," his mother started, "you're the only goddamn thing that little girl's got. She has the biggest heart in the world, and you keep on breaking it."

Clyde clenched his jaw, trying to remain calm. "It provides, Ma." He closed his eyes and concentrated on remaining civil. "I work five to six deliveries a year. I'm with her as much as possible. I put food on the table. I put books on her desk.

I"

"Oh, and what?" She interrupted. "You think that makes you a *good* father?" Her voice lowered but remained sharp. "You are doing the absolute minimum, and you're perfectly content with that. That's how you've *always* been." She didn't say it out loud, but Clyde knew her last sentence was about Macy's mother.

Clyde couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "Oh, it's the *minimum*, is it? Putting my ass on the line, getting shot at by smugglers and pirates, having a boulder crush my leg and almost being stranded on a moon a million goddamn miles away is the *minimum*?" Clyde paused and made sure he chose his next words carefully. "Then what the *fuck* do you call what you and Dad did?"

His mother's eyes widened. "That is not fair we—"

"Don't worry." Clyde brushed past her towards the farmhouse. "I have a flight to catch."

Clyde stepped into the homestead to see his daughter off. Walking into the foyer, his head flooded with memories. Some good, some bad, but all meaningful. He took a walk around the living room, and did his best to purposefully avoid snooping, but he was often curious what his mother got up to. Unfortunately for Clyde, he found nothing interesting. No signs of illicit activities, or worse, a local suitor, so he made his way up the rotting stairs.

Clyde opened the bedroom door to see Macy diligently folding her clothes into a

dust covered dresser that could almost be considered an antique. Clyde thought she looked like she belonged in one of those tv shows that aired 250 years ago that they show at a museum. A little girl in a white dress doing chores around some dusty old farmhouse. The only difference was that the prairies in the TV shows were green, not decaying, used-up farmland. Clyde noticed the sun shining through the window into the dark room, illuminating diagonal columns of dust.

“You think you’re a vampire or something?” Clyde joked as he flipped the light switch by the door. The light he was waiting to flood the room never came. He flipped the switch twice more to no avail.

“You got to get a new bulb.” Macy shuffled around in a cluttered drawer until she found a glass light bulb and handed it to her father.

Clyde laughed, “Wow, you know they don’t even make these kinds of light anymore? If the energy marshal came around your grandma would have to pay more money than this house is worth.”

“Yeah, most of the things in this house don’t work,” Macy said in a flat tone, looking away from her father.

Clyde could hear the dejection in her voice.

“Macy...” he tried to find the right thing to say. “One day I’ll get a job here being other delivery men’s boss. We’ll get a bigger house, move to a nicer town, and we’ll only have to visit grandma once in a while.”

She looked up at him with hopeful

eyes. “And more birds?”

“Yes.” Clyde brushed her hair back as they shared a laugh. It was good to hear her joke. “Every single bird they sell.”

Clyde remembered the first “bird” he had brought back to Macy. It was some 10 credit glass bird they had sold at every little space station from here to the furthest system that was even remotely commercialized. She had liked it so much that he kept buying little ones until she had a decent collection going. Eventually, the birds went out of production and now what was once a cheap souvenir turned into a 200 CR collector’s item that cat ladies across the galaxy have fistfights over. Turns out, even at 2 years-old Macy had an expensive taste, just like her mother. This made Clyde smile.

She had them all lined up in her room at his house. Birds of all colors. Some bright pink, some translucent, but her favorites were the blue ones. She likes a certain lighter blue, almost with a tint of green in it, but far from aquamarine. Just a subtle enough shade to know something’s different. That’s what she liked.

“Promise you’ll be back?” Macy whispered. “It doesn’t have to be before Christmas.” Her hope was obvious. “But it would be nice.”

Clyde searched for the right words.

“I know how dangerous it is.” She surprised Clyde with how old she sounded. “I looked it up. I wanted to learn more about what you do. ‘Cause maybe I want to do it when I grow up.” She turned away from him. “But it seems scary.”

“Hey.” Clyde knelt. “First thing, you don’t need to be doing any looking on the internet about what I do.” Clyde couldn’t help but feel proud of her natural curiosity, but he knew it was better not to show it. “Maybe being out here will be a good thing for you.” He tilted his head down and made sure to look her in the eyes.

“Second thing is, little lady, you don’t worry about me, okay? I’ve been doing this a long time. And I was in the military, remember? It was a lot scarier there.” Clyde could tell this did not help. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “I love you, okay? I promise I’ll be back, and it’s wrong to break a promise, right?”

She looked up at him, lips quivering. “I love you too.”

After a tearful goodbye and a 200CR promise made to his daughter, Clyde exited the farmhouse thinking he had successfully avoided its matriarch. As he made his way to his truck, he was disappointed to be ambushed by the gaunt-faced woman in flannel. While twirling a lit cigarette between her fingers, she leaned on his truck, a relic that struck memories of her late husband in her. Clyde walked in silence while avoiding her stare. As he got in the truck, she began to speak.

“Junior, you are going to get yourself killed.” She began to sound like a mother again. “Please. Make sure this is your last run. For Macy’s sake. For *your* sake. For—” she hesitated as she tried to soften the edge her fifty-eight years had sharpened on her, “For *my* sake.”

Clyde always knew his mother was a

hard woman. Raising two sons practically on your own and losing one of them millions of miles away on some godforsaken moon will do that to you. She had been rough on him, rough as hell, but never once beat him or abandoned him. That’s more than he could say about her other half. She fed him, clothed him, and though she tried her damndest to show otherwise, she loved him.

“I love you, Ma.” Clyde finally responded as he turned the engine over. He looked her in the eyes for the first since he had arrived. “I’ll be okay.”

#

By the time Clyde had arrived at the spaceport, a light gray overcast had blanketed the evening sky. Grabbing his coat, he cursed at the temperature drop. The long walk from his parking spot to the bidding house will feel even longer. As he shuffled across the near freezing parking lot, he watched company ships come and go from their respective docks, painting the horizon with exhaust fumes. Each ship carrying some unlucky soul who’d either been born so poor, or wasted every other opportunity they had, that they were forced to resort to being an overworked and underpaid delivery boy.

Clyde entered the auction house and was greeted with a blast of artificially heated air, making him sweat almost instantly. Taking off his coat, he looked up to see a familiar sight: a crowd of tattooed and rash-skinned men standing in a group, yelling out bids at each job that flashed on a large digital screen attached to the far

wall. Each job was posted with the same set of information: The offering company, delivery location, due date, provided equipment, payment distribution, starting bid, and package specifications.

There were other spaceports that offered courier-bidding, mainly on Orbital Colonial Stations (OCS), and for the most part, each station was closer to the pick-up and delivery points than Earth. Since distance makes simultaneous bid-confirmation impossible, most job postings that weren't taken at any other sites ended up being posted on Earth, making the selections for Earth based-couriers either too cheap or too dangerous for other folk. If by chance the posting wouldn't be taken on Earth, it ended up back in rotation on the closest station to the delivery point with a much higher starting bid available on it.

Generally, Clyde would take the time travel out to an OCS first, so he could snag up a quality bid, but if wanted to make it home for Christmas, he had to find a diamond in the rough that made it through to this particular bidding station.

The first bid announced since Clyde had entered the building flashed on the screen:

COMPANY: EDISON SPACE FREIGHT
PICK-UP LOCATION: IO COLONIAL
ADMINISTRATION CENTER
DELIVERY LOCATION: OCS-4
"ODESSA"
DELIVER BY: DECEMBER 8th
EQUIPMENT PROVIDED: ATX-180

PSC, DIO T8 FULL-BODY SUIT
20% UPFRONT
25,000 CR
PACKAGE DETAILS: 20x18x10, 32.45lbs,
NON-FRAGILE,
PACKAGE CONTENT: UNSPECIFIED

Clyde and most other veteran couriers rolled their eyes while the younger men began bidding the job down. It's not that it was a terrible job, Clyde thought. It was safe, quick, but it was cheap. The kind of job someone just starting out takes before they learn to see past what was displayed. Edison was the biggest and most well-known interplanetary shipping company since the late 21st century, and they knew how to keep increasing their profit margins, which to Clyde meant they knew how to trick younger couriers into taking jobs that were not worth their time.

Located in orbit of Venus, OCS-4, nicknamed "Odessa", was probably the safest destination one could hope to deliver to. It served as not only the headquarters for many shipping companies, but also acted as the Union's hub for all space-related military activities. Any piracy by rouge vessels between Earth and Venus was considered suicide among criminals, which made jobs like this one attractive to couriers who may not have the thickest of skin. The Edison Company was very aware how comfortable and safe this job was, as reflected by the equipment it provided. The DIO T8 body suit wasn't rated for combat at all and stored only enough thruster fuel for quick out-of-craft repair

jobs, and hardly enough oxygen to last for more than a few days.

With the provided ATX-180 Personal Space Craft, getting to Odessa in half a month wouldn't be an issue. Like most spacecraft manufactured in the early 22nd Century, it equipped with a hyperdrive capable of bending the space around the vessel, severely shortening the time it takes to travel planetary distances. The short distance almost made Clyde consider the job. He'd be home for Christmas, but the job wouldn't pay for a day more. As much he liked to take it, keeping bills in check came first.

After a greenhorn delivery boy took the Odessa job for a hacked down 15,000CR, the next job was displayed:

COMPANY: COSMIC LEAP LABS
PICK-UP LOCATION: LUNAR CITY 3
"NEW ATHENA"
DELIVERY LOCATION: SATURN
JOINT RESEARCH STATION XC-001
DELIVERY BY: FEBRUARY 22ND
40,000 CR
15% UPFRONT
PACKAGE DETAILS: 18x18x18,
EXTREMELY FRAGILE,
PACKAGE CONTENT: CHEMICAL
RESEARCH EQUIPMENT

Clyde's fingers began itching as he considered throwing in a bid. He'd miss both Christmas and Macy's birthday, again. He watched the timer tick down.

"35,000!" Clyde's voice called out from the crowd.

"34,750!" said a courier that Clyde had only vaguely recognized.

Clyde countered back, "34,250!"

A moment passed

"33,500!"

Clyde determined that it would be best to not match this, and so he let himself be underbid by his eager colleague.

As the night grew on, the job postings only grew uglier. They all were seemingly some low priority near-Earth shipments, or far flung out-of-system governmental contracts that required a hypergate certification that Clyde was not eligible for.

Before long, a job was posted that finally hit a sweet spot with Clyde.

COMPANY: RED REACH
PICKUP LOCATION: LOCAL
DELIVERY LOCATION: INTERNAL
SITE 7
DELIVER BY: DECEMBER 23rd
80,000 CR
5% UPFRONT
PACKAGE DIMENSIONS: 2x2x1
PACKAGE CONTENTS: CLASSIFIED
EQUIPMENT PROVIDED: 1 BLACK
SPARROW COMPACT SPACECRAFT
1 UHL HEAVY TERRAIN ROVER
(ATTACHED)
1 HAZOP GRADED EXOSUIT
1 MARQUETTE PERSONAL DEFENSE
HANDGUN

Never being the quickest at mental math, Clyde calculated the time it would take for him to complete this job. He came to realize if he hauled ass and cut a few

corners he'd be able to make it home for Christmas. Local pickup is nice too, cuts down on half the work. The package will get loaded for him automatically. With the kind of money being offered, it'd be a Christmas like one Macy had never seen before. However, the pay was the exact thing causing him hesitation. A job like this should've been snagged a lot quicker or be paying a lot lower. Clyde scanned the faces of his fellow couriers only to see similar expressions to his. He could see their minds trying to piece together what information was left out of the posting.

Hesitantly, Clyde spoke up, "60,000." His bid was followed by silence and darting eyes. *Shit, he thought, should have waited.*

As the bid-clock ticked down, Clyde began to sweat. Half of him wanted the job, the other half wanted someone to beat him out so he wouldn't have to find out what made this job so well paying. By the time the clock hit zero, Clyde was cursing himself for taking a job with so many red flags, but it was too late to back out now, his ID was connected with the job, and it cost a small fortune to break a contract.

The procedure for every delivery is the same. After a courier signs the standard boilerplate safety and nondisclosure papers, he's given documents specifically from his employer detailing the shipment, where it's going, if there could be any trouble, and anything that a company could consider sensitive information. These papers were usually 10-20 electronic pages of information that largely was not of too

much concern to the courier, in fact Clyde hadn't read a job's paperwork all the way through since his first few jobs.

Clyde made his way over to the pre-boarding room and began filing the forms necessary to launch. He kept his eye out for any apparent excess of liability forms, or risk management papers that would indicate whether his employer was skeptical of Clyde's ability to make it back from the job. He was provided with no more paperwork than a quick jump to Earth's moon would have required. It was when the auction-house clerk handed him the job-specific documents, that Clyde's worst fears were confirmed.

The papers in front of Clyde were painted black. Details about his employer, and where he was going, were obscured. This triggered a deep uneasiness in him. His eyes scanned the heavily redacted two-page document that only revealed the coordinates of a drop site, a delivery time, and instructions to leave the unspecified package in a drop box. In Clyde's decade or so of running across the system to deliver items, from frozen chicken to weapons parts, he had never come across a job so menacingly vague.

The pen weighed heavily in Clyde's hand, which caused him to realize something else peculiar about the entire situation. This is the first job Clyde had taken, or even ever heard of, that required him to sign physical papers, rather than the usual electronic signature he had saved in the courier network, COURNET.

Whoever I'm doing this for, Clyde

thought, *doesn't want much tracked back to them, do they?*

Despite the numerous red flags, he signed the papers issued to him and handed them back to the clerk in a secure envelope. Clyde watched the clerk enter the final pre-boarding information into his terminal before he turned to face him.

"Alright my man, that'll do it," the clerk said through a yawn. "You want to ship out tonight, or wait till the morning?"

"Oh, I'd appreciate it if I could lift off tonight," responded Clyde.

"Not a problem." The clerk turned back to his monitor and entered the appropriate information to get Clyde spaceborn before the station halted launches for the night. "Looks like they'll be swinging your ship around to Port-4B." A ticket printed out at the clerk's desk, and he handed it to Clyde. He gave a nod to the clerk and turned for the door.

"Hey man, mind if I ask you a question?" the clerk asked as Clyde was walking away.

"Shoot."

"This company... 'Red Reach'... are they new? Upstarts or something?" The clerk's eyes were lit with apprehensive curiosity. "I just ain't ever heard of them before."

The clerk's question did not ease Clyde's anxiety.

"Don't know," Clyde had responded while walking through the glass doors. "Probably." His quick dismissal was not out of annoyance on part of the clerk, but ease his own regret.

#

As Clyde reached his port, he saw a crew bringing around his ship through a large window. The ship was company provided, and while it was an older model, it still carried a glow about it that only virgin ships had. The ship was smaller in every dimension than a regular cargo vessel, but Clyde saw no immediate reason to be concerned. The trip was short, and the cargo was light so he shouldn't have to worry about fuel or oxygen storage. The ship itself consisted of four small sections: a pilot and co-pilot cabin stationed at its helm, an open room with additional passenger seats facing each wall by the entrance door, a small lavatory in the back, and a luggage closet across from it. The biggest portion of the ship was the hold underneath it that held the vehicular rover that would be used for on-planet transport.

As he boarded the vessel, Clyde immediately made his way back to the cargo vault to inspect the package. The vault was secured against the back wall in-between the restroom and the storage closet. It was procedure for the courier to ensure the package was still there immediately on boarding, however it was curiosity, not professionalism, that drove Clyde towards the hatch. It was against dozens of laws and occupational standards for Clyde to open his client's property, but the itch swelled inside of him. He lifted the aluminum box from its vault and was surprised by its weight. He had expected to feel items shifting around, or a singularly heavy box, but found a light, seemingly

empty package no heavier than a shoebox. Clyde shook the box and listened for anything that might clue him in on what it contained, but heard nothing.

Clyde examined the box to see if there was any way of opening it without his client noticing but saw there was not. He placed the package back in the lockbox and secured the outer hatch. Clyde walked over to the cockpit, seated himself, and switched on the center console to begin filling out his preflight checklist.

After completing his official requirements, Clyde began the launch procedure and cleared his flight with the tower. He was glad he wasn't required to complete total flight training like pilots of the past, only enough to take over during an emergency. Although if the need arises, Clyde's experience commandeering enemy ships would be more than enough to suffice. Once he finished his navigation inputs, he fastened himself in his chair and watched the takeoff from the window. Clyde stuck his hand into his pocket and found the damaged pack of smokes.

During his time with Macy, he tried his best to curb his vices. Whiskey wasn't hard for him to abstain from, he held his curse words back well, and he didn't worry too much about the odd chance of bringing a lady home, but tobacco was always in the back of his mind. Occasionally he'd sneak a lip of chew in when he could, though there were many-a-times when had to gut the spit if Macy had caught him by surprise. He tried to be what little of a role model he could be for

her.

As he reclined his chair, he switched the oxygen filtration off and he lit his cigarette. Clyde watched the ground grow gradually smaller as his ship began its ascent. He knew the dangers of lighting a cigarette in his craft, he'd seen the mandatory safety videos, but he knew that advances in technology had minimized the danger. Clyde also reasoned that he'd die thanks to the cigarettes before he would in an oxygen explosion.

The ascent into the upper atmosphere was the last thing Clyde remembered before falling asleep while his ship launched into space. He thought of his earliest days running packages for less than reputable folk during the infant days of his career; his nerves had hardly allowed him to sleep for the first 12 hours of the trip. Nowadays, he drifted off the very second he escaped Earth's gravity.

#

The piercing sound of a comm request rustled Clyde from his sleep. It took him a few seconds to gather himself and assess where the hell he was. Out of the front window, he saw a floating circle-shaped building, flickering red lights against the blackness of space. A refueling station. He flipped on the control center's lights and checked his navigation data. What he saw surprised him, he was already close to passing the refueling station along his route. Clyde realized the alarm he set that was meant to wake him up 45 minutes prior to this destination did not go off. Cursing the faulty mechanic, he flipped on

the comm channels to answer the request, and caught a hail from the station mid-sentence

“-vessel this Delta Station. I repeat, come in Black Sparrow vessel, this is Delta Station, do you copy?”

Clyde held down the comm button and spoke into his headset, “Delta Station this is-” Clyde frantically looked around for a reminder of his specific vessel’s call sign and grabbed a folder that had been opened up and its contents scattered on the floor, “Romeo Romeo One One Seven, requesting toll clearance for CID 55-2973.”

“Clyde?” responded to the station. “What the hell man? What took you so long to reply?”

Clyde recognized the voice coming over the comm line and shot back, “Well shit, Freddy, you know I have to make you work for it. Gotta keep it interesting.”

The truth was: Clyde knew damn well if it had been anyone else manning the station he would have been asked to stop for a full inspection. A detour that would have cost his trip a full day or two, and a mark-off on his already spotty performance record. Refusing hails from any sort of refueling station was met with extreme caution and was not taken lightly. During the war, there were too many instances of ships loaded with explosives being led right into the stations. Even though that was over, people still didn’t trust a quiet ship.

Freddy shot back, “Goddamnit C.J., you ever going to quit busting my balls?”

Clyde smiled. It had been a while since anyone called him “CJ.” After his father

left, he wasn’t keen to take on the “Clyde Junior” moniker that his childhood friends and sweethearts knew him by.

“Not till you actually grow a pair, little man.” responded Clyde with a juvenile grin. He had heard someone else in the background of Freddy’s comm line laugh.

“Am I good to dock?” Clyde asked.

“Sure thing,” Freddy confirmed. “You know the drill.”

The refueling station was an older construction. Not one of the first built during the beginning of interplanetary freight transport, but well before the war. The rusted pipes and jerry-rigged seals were the price to pay for being a refueling station on the way to Mars. Little traffic led to little funding. Despite the facility being sub-par compared, Freddy and his crew did damn fine work.

Freddy had been refitting ships since he was 14 years old. Four years in his father’s shipyard, then for ten more during the war. Even through Clyde’s dishonorable discharge, Freddy stuck by his back and earned his fair share of bruises in a variety of bars across the system. Clyde couldn’t say the same for many of the other men he served with.

Freddy and Clyde leaned over a railing watching the maintenance crew tend to Clyde’s ship. Dressed in a bright orange jumpsuit, Freddy stood half a head shorter than Clyde. His curly red hair was closer to his scalp than it was when they were young, but his energy was still that of a boy. The laugh lines embedded in his face flanked his familiar grin as he met Clyde on the

deck above hanger bay.

Always familiar, Freddy threw his arm around Clyde's neck. "How's your mother, brother?"

Clyde raised his eyebrows, "Same old mom."

"Oh Bethy-Beth," Freddy laughed. "Someday I'm going to fly my boat down to that farmhouse and she'll be happy to see me for once."

Clyde looked at Freddy's "boat" docked in the back of the hangar bay. A small blue shuttle he's had since the day they came back from the service. It was hard for him to make his own way when he got back to earth. He tried out courier work with Clyde for a while, but his relationship with clients spoiled more often than not. It was a good fit for him up here at the refueling station. He did what he knew best, and he stayed out of people's hair back home.

Despite what he said, it was his own hang-ups, not Clyde's mother's, that made him hesitant to visit her. After her oldest son died in his arms, he struggled to look her in the eye. To her credit though, she never blamed him. Pitied him maybe more than anything. The mother knew it was Clyde's brother who had been the one to rally Freddy into serving. She always believed it was his way of showing he was better than his father. Regardless, Freddy couldn't step foot on her property without being overwhelmed with guilt. That much was clear to even Clyde. This guilt would often manifest in his interactions with Clyde, who despite being an adult, Freddy

had a habit of looking after.

"Why's a vet like you doing this sort of job anyway?" Freddy asked skeptically while retracting his arm from around Clyde.

Clyde shook his head looking for an answer. He raked his brain trying to understand his decision, and only came up with the same answer, over and over again: *Macy*

"Don't think it does that little girl much good if her daddy is just another puddle of red on a rock already painted with it," Freddy responded automatically as though he had already known Clyde's answer in his head.

Clyde scoffed, "It's one damn job it's not like- "

"It's always one job," interrupted Freddy. His eyes narrowed. "Always one job. Don't give me the bullshit. Always one more run. Always one last tour. Stick your damn nose up Clyde," Freddy tapped his nostrils, "this job has a stench to hit."

Clyde held his tongue for once, only out of the debt of friendship.

Freddy continued, "If you think this is the life your brother would have wanted for you, if you think for one second Adam would have- "

"Man, shut the hell up." Clyde pushed himself from the railing and turned to face Freddy. "You got no damn business telling me what- "

"No," Freddy interrupted with authority. The mechanic chested up to Clyde. Despite being shorter now, he still moved like Clyde was a child and he was the antagonizing teenager. "*He'd* want you

to hear this. *He'd* tell you how stupid you're being." Freddy's sharp, black eyes burnt into Clyde. He wasn't used to seeing him like this. "*He'd* tell to forget the job and go back home to his niece."

Clyde breathed in deep and broke eye contact.

"He'd sit your ass down and tell you it's too dangerous," Freddy continued, slowly. "Just like he did on Titan."

"Yeah?" Clyde shook his head and gritted his teeth. "Well he's not here because he was too cautious. He's not here *because* I stayed back, and I wasn't there." Clyde's voice began to raise. "He's buried in a fucking unmarked grave on a moon *because* of me."

Freddy scoffed, "You think you could have done something? Something different than I did?" His tone turned accusatory. "I get you like to imagine you could have been a martyr Clyde, I really do, but you were a teenager with limp."

"I could have held a gun!" Clyde yelled. When did his hands start shaking? Memories of guilt and pain moved his words before his brain could do anything about it. "I could have helped!"

"You were *fifteen years old!*" Freddy's voice echoed throughout the garage. Bouncing off the chassis of the dozen ships. "It was our fault you were even conscripted to begin with. You were a child, and we were stupid, thinking we'd let you come on our little space adventure. Now you're a father who keeps running away from the only good thing that ever happened to him."

Clyde remained silent. He stared at Freddy and accepted the non-verbal apology that was evident in his expression.

Freddy sighed, "I just think it's stupid man. You ain't got no business in that war zone. Half the planet is officially no-go for any civilians, and another quarter of it is still *de facto* under nationalist control."

Freddy wasn't wrong. The delivery area was a hotbed for insurrectionist exploits. Any scientific outpost, refueling station, or back-dust settlement was under separatist "protection." Clyde knew it, everyone knew it.

"Look," Clyde started, "I know the risks. I also know how to survive."

His friend was silent.

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Sure." Freddy was short.

"There's a blue glass bird at the gift shop here," Clyde said with his head lowered.

Freddy's eyes squinted and darted back and forth, unsure of where Clyde was going with this.

"Buy it for me, and I'll pick it up on the way back after I get paid." Clyde turned to face Freddy head-on now. "And if I don't make it back. Give *your* niece a Christmas gift."

Freddy smiled at the gesture of calling Macy his niece, "Sure thing man."

#

As the red planet in front Clyde began to rapidly fill his front window, he flipped open his company provided folder and reviewed the documents. He was happy with the time he was making after his stop

at the refueling station. Hour-to-hour discrepancies in his itinerary weren't the end of the world, when just one clerical mistake—on his end or another's—could mean he would have to tread in orbit for a day or two while the colonial bureaucracy went to work.

Mars, like some of the more contentious colonies on the outer rim, had some of the toughest interplanetary security there was. It used to be that working for the Interplanetary Transportation Bureau was a cushy gig if you got stationed anywhere near Earth, but some more-than-ambitious arms dealers encouraged the Feds to tighten things up.

As Clyde initiated landing protocols, his mind raced back to his conversation with Freddy. What *was* he doing this job for? Was it Macy? Was it too late to quit? He knew the answer to the last question at least. Abandoning a job this late would guarantee a permanent mark in his record and would make it difficult for him to be taken seriously on the auction floor. Despite his less-than-ideal military service, Clyde had grinded out a decently renowned reputation among the courier's union, and if he wanted to make sure he'd be considered for any future jobs that weren't the bottom of the barrel, he had to see this through.

The radio crackled, "RR-117 clearance has been approved, please designate port."

Clyde referred to his job packet, which he had ready this time, "Designated port is 6-8."

The dispatcher paused, "Say again RR-

117."

Clyde cleared his throat. He was unsure what the issue was. "Port 6-8. Zone 6, sector 8." The second silence was even longer. Clyde spoke again. "Dispatch, do you copy?"

"Yes, we copy." This response was immediate. "Hang tight, Romeo."

Clyde shifted in his seat and let out a shaky breath. Was the port open? Bad tags on the ship? He was cursing himself for thinking how smooth the trip was going so far, he knew there would inevitably be some snag.

Goddamnit, he thought to himself. He imagined being held up even longer, and missing Christmas. Low-balling a risky ass bid all for nothing. Clyde's fidgeting accelerated, and he felt his blood pressure rising.

"Fellas?" He leaned into his speaker, "Everything clean? It's alright if I messed up the paperwork," he said with a forced laugh. "You can tell me."

"Romeo..." Another pause from dispatch. "You are clear to enter the atmosphere. But it's probably one of my obligations to inform you Martian ITB strongly *does not* recommend use of 6-8. There have been..." The dispatcher was trying to choose his words carefully, "... fatalities. Only reason it's not shut down completely is that it's the only port within a few thousand miles of some townships that need the oxygen and produce imports. And quite frankly, those townships won't be too fond of you."

Clyde smiled to himself, "I appreciate

that dispatch, but the good folks over at Red Reach need some packages ASAP, and I took the job.”

“They must pay you boys pretty well. You’re not the first man that group’s hired to come through here. And you probably won’t be the last.”

The dispatcher’s words did not put Clyde to ease. The longer this trip went on, the more weird little things stuck out in his mind. Why the secrecy? Everyone Clyde had talked to since he took this job felt the same thing he did. Something isn’t right. Even the equipment, from the barely used ship, to the singular pistol, told a story worth suspicion. He did his best to choke down his fears, but his concentration was interrupted by a sharp alarm indicating that a landing was imminent.

Red dirt spiraled around Clyde’s ship as he cautiously flew into the abandoned port. The building had obviously been neglected for a decade, maybe more. Only necessary repairs and maintenance had been done. Dispatch had informed Clyde that the post was operated remotely, meaning any services Clyde could have normally expected to be completed by professional mechanics, he would have to do himself.

The station itself was a house-sized dome that functioned as an office, surrounded by dozens of docking stations that were metallic frames the size of a garage. Clyde swung his ship into the docking frame as the robotic arms began to intertwine themselves with his ship’s hull, and worked to detach the rover from the

underneath hold. The automated process forwarded him the necessary logs and digital paperwork on his onboard computer to update their records, which was not Clyde’s favorite thing to do after a long flight.

As he contemplated banging his head against his dashboard, he instead swung his right hand out to the adjacent control panel and cut the oxygen production to his cabin. After double checking that the process was complete so he wouldn’t go up in a ball of fire, Clyde drew a cigarette out and lit it. He tried his best to enjoy what he could of the tobacco, but somewhere among his circumstances, the pleasure was lost.

After the paperwork was finished and the oxygen returned to normal, Clyde slipped on his exosuit to prepare for the Martian atmosphere. The suit itself was simple, but quality. Whoever Red Reach was, they afforded him better equipment than most. Especially for a delivery to Mars, since companies often did not care to shell out good for equipment on short destinations deliveries. As Clyde was feeling out the suit, he decompressed the craft and lowered the ramp to the ground. Descending it, Clyde did his best to examine his surroundings. He had done a few jobs on Mars in the past, but nothing this far out in the boonies. It had primarily been standard equipment deliveries to mining outposts or terraforming operations.

Clyde approached the uncovered maintenance station that the rover had

been moved to, and was greeted by graffiti spanning the doors. *Hell's Gate* was inscribed in black letters which had been tinted red by months—if not years—of dirt blowing in the wind. Normally Clyde was not intimidated easily. His years of fighting across the not-so-unified systems smoothed out his nerves. However, he had heard rumors about the groups on Mars, which likened them to some of humanity's crueller, and more effective militias and terrorists.

After being pushed out of most major colonial settlements, the different factions who supported separatist causes were forced to back into the Martian mountains. Out of necessity, they banded together, and in some sick form of hybrid vigor, any redeeming traits the individual groups had were bred out, and they took on each other's more vicious habits. Clyde wished that there was some form support from Martian Security Troopers, but they were spread too thin among population centers to be concerned with rooting out their enemies in the hills. Any Interfederal support from the Marines was out of the question too, Clyde reasoned, after one of the major concessions of the peace talks during the war was a drawing back interplanetary jurisdiction. He was completely alone.

Clyde sauntered over to the detached rover and was pleased to find the rover held within seemed only slightly used. The coat of paint was only stained a light brown, which is rare on Mars. The tires, the suspension, the exhaust all seemed

ready to traverse the intense terrain. Clyde connected his digital tablet and ran the basic diagnostic tests, but he was able to eyeball enough that skipping a detailed test would let him save an hour or two off his trip.

Clyde entered the rover through a side door and admired the space. It was a similar size to different troop transport vehicles he had ridden in over the years. Plenty of space to stretch out if he needed to rest during the ride, ample first aid kits, and even some emergency rations laid out in the back which piqued his interest. He made his way over to the back of the rover to see exactly what was on the menu. Meals weren't listed on the amenities provided by Red Reach, but if they were on the rover, then Clyde figured he had free range.

Some corporations allowed couriers more freedom than others. Good companies would stock you up with food, pay you up front, and even let you have the freedom to tweak and mod your equipment sometimes. Others, however, would go as far as locking you out of certain parts of your vehicles, and strapping them with GPS trackers and limited-channel radios. Red Reach seemed more on the former's end, but even then, he found that they locked him out of the storage space underneath the floor of the rover, where he was hoping to find something to help pass the time. It was one of the only pleasant traditions among the profession, Clyde thought, that couriers would leave surprise stashes of booze or other contraband in hidden compartments

for the next driver to find.

Now positioned in the cockpit, Clyde accessed the station log remotely, and input his departure. He gave a halfhearted attempt to see if he could access the station's database and view other deliveries by Red Reach, but the database was unable to find any records. After admitting defeat in his efforts to get a little transparency on the part of his mysterious client, he initiated the autopilot, and the rover began its trek into the mountains.

Hours passed. The vehicle tore across the red desert like a scar, and as he neared the treacherous mountains, Clyde ascended from his reclined position and began preparations. It would only take an hour, 45 minutes if he was lucky, to cut through the mountain passes necessary, but he knew this would be the make-it-or-break stretch. Getting home to Macy in one piece all hinged on this.

Clyde slowed the rover down to a halt and made his way to the back of the vehicle. He double-checked that the first-aid kits had the necessary equipment, and that the rations were not stripped of anything. He opened a box of ready-to-eat Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes—a personal favorite of his from his service—and tried to get his fill so there'd be no need to stop on the way back. Once his presence was made known in the mountains, it made it more likely he'd be followed out, which would make the idea of a meal break a little less appetizing.

Settling back into the driver seat, he ran his fingers across the gauges in front of

him. *Fuel, tire pressure, engine temp*, all clear. Clyde made one final check in the back of the vehicle under the bench seats. As he'd read in files, under the left bench was a package for driver defense. Unlocking the case, Clyde found a small Marquette-brand pistol rated for Martian atmosphere. He stripped the small arm down and ensured the firing mechanisms were ready for any chance encounter. Finally, he inserted the preloaded magazine into the pistol, and placed it gently in a holster attached to his driver's seat. He hadn't used a Marquette weapon before, the little ragtag guerrilla group he was in didn't have access to nicest small arms. He was pleasantly surprised with how light the pistol felt.

#

The rover shook as it battled through the rocky inclines that blanketed the unfamiliar route. Accessing his map through the rover's onboard computer, Clyde examined the suggested route that the navigation unit was guiding him along and felt a mix of confusion and frustration. While the route chosen was shorter by kilometer, there was clearly an easier path for the rover to trek through that would only add an extra 30-40 minutes to the trip.

Clyde grappled with the decision. Backtracking to access the new route would add even more time along with the given distance, but he was already making good time, and the safety of the other route along a valley would ease his stomach a little. On the map he was able to see there was a small plateau directly ahead of his

position on the current route, which would allow him to sit more comfortably while deciding his strategy. Clyde put the rover in the appropriate gear to finish the current climb, which pushed the rover to its limits.

Christ, Clyde thought to himself. Why would Red Reach spend this much on equipment if they knew the route that *they* chose was going to wear the rover well beyond its years? He felt the rover wheeze beneath him as it crested the final ridge to the plateau. The light of the Martian sky illuminated the remainder of his windows, and in almost symbiotic fashion, Clyde breathed his own sigh of relief along with the vehicle.

Parking the machine a ways onto the plateau, Clyde reexamined the map. The remainder of the route seemed the same, if not more intense, than what he had just finished. Clyde cursed whatever screen jockey at Red Reach marked this up for his Nav. The way he saw it, even if he wanted to continue this route, he couldn't. In part anger and part professionalism, Clyde began the process of radioing Red Reach's point-of-contact. He didn't know if they were the type of Corp to get bitchy if a courier altered routes, and he didn't want to push it. Not to mention the piece of his mind he planned on giving them for the route decision.

He accessed the file giving the contact details for his job and dialed in the number for Red Reach. The ringing reverberated throughout the hull of the rover, and after a pause, cut out

completely. Clyde redialed. Same Result.

You gotta be kidding me, Clyde thought. Four times, no pickup. Cut off each time. With a heavy sigh, he weighed his options. He could cut his losses and redirect, risking a pissing match with Red Reach if it came to it, but he'd rather avoid his paycheck getting held up on a holiday. He figured the safer bet was trying to use a third-party to relay the message.

Using his radio, he flipped to the COURNET channel that connected to Martian dispatch, and wondered if the worker who gave him a friendly warning about what he would encounter would have a good laugh at this. After finding the radio, he leaned into the speaker.

"Martian dispatch this Romeo-Romeo 117 requesting arbitration."

Silence. Clyde repeated his hail. Silence.

"Martian dispatch. Do you *copy*?" Clyde said through his teeth.

Of all the omens that warned Clyde against this job. This one struck him the hardest. No contact from the company, no communication to authorities, and no one backing him up. He was completely alone with no contact to the outside world, deep into insurrectionist territories. But, Clyde thought, at least he had enough rations for a small army. As a matter of fact, he realized he had enough first-aid kits for one as well. He reckoned the materials he was carrying would suit a small militia pretty darn well for a few months. That is, if a small militia just happened to conveniently stumble on to him.

His stomach turned. He felt a deep sinking feeling as he pushed down a sickening revelation.

He swallowed hard and scrambled for the underside of his dashboard. His hands sweating and trembling, he ripped off the access panel to the radio and threw himself on the floor of the rover. With his hands inside the compartment, he felt around the wires of the radio. Running his fingers along the inside, he traced each wire to its destination. One by one, he checked for any obstructions, and loose wires that would screw up the radio connection. Suddenly, his fingers brushed a small box, no larger than a square eraser. Loosening the wire, he pulled down on it and craned his head to see a small black box with one wire running in, and two wires running out. A bright green light flashed on the device, mocking him.

Clyde reached back and grabbed a knife he kept on the inside of the door, and in one swift motion he amputated the wires from the box. He examined the device, but he already knew what it was. He had been trained early on in his military career to be alerted to the presence of small devices when communicating information back-and-forth on the frontlines. It was a simple piece of technology, designed to redirect any audio-visual communication to a two-way receiver, along with the location of the device.

Shit.

Someone didn't want him contacting anyone. Worse, they would now know

Clyde had found the device since that communication had been cut, and they would know where he is. He cursed himself. He cursed his stupidity, he cursed arrogance, he cursed going against his better nature.

Without much to lose, and without thinking, Clyde lifted himself from the floor and walked to the back of the vehicle. He grabbed the package he was hired to deliver and ripped open the electronic seal that would be sure to notify Red Reach, whoever they are, that the package is open. Clyde now realized why the parcel was so light. Inside the package was a key box that held a simple key with no distinction to any other keys Clyde had ever seen. Grabbing the jagged piece of metal, Clyde's eyes drifted over the locked floor compartment.

Clyde knelt to the ground and unlocked the cabinet. It opened to reveal a variety of boxes, the *real* cargo he was meant to deliver, Clyde figured. He instantly recognized crates up crates of arms. Long crates for rifles, short and fat crates for ammunition, maybe even explosives. All sizes he was intimately familiar with. And there was the smell, the smell of oil, and steel and powder.

He was being used as a sacrificial mule for an arms-smuggling operation. As the stench of weaponry overwhelmed him, he knew he was never meant to make it off Mars, and that the real recipients of the delivery would be on their way to intercept him.

He buried his face in his palms. His

breath was still. In the darkness, he saw Macy. He saw her smiling, sitting on his mother's bed. He saw Freddy approaching the door of the farmhouse, union insurance paperwork in hand. He saw his mother, on her knees cradling Macy. He saw his dead body burning in a ditch on a red planet, alone. Best case scenario, someone would find him and would unload his coffin at the farmhouse doorstep.

He was bait. He was a sacrifice. *No*, he thought, a sacrifice at least requires a reverence to ritual. All he was dirt, a fleck of dirt meant to be washed away from the food, medicine, and mint condition military equipment he was attached to. His mind flashed to his brother. Buried on a moon hundreds of millions of miles away. Their mother forced them to share plenty as kids, and it was only fitting that they share an untimely death in a strange place too. Although, Clyde thought as his heart started racing, he was never good at sharing, was he? So why start now?

He snapped his head up from the floor compartment and his eyes moved back to the wires of the radio hanging like intestines from the front console. He repositioned himself on the floor below, looking up into the mess. He figured whoever was coming for him was no more than 15, maybe 20 miles away. Those devices don't transmit well any farther. He fiddled with the wires, bridging some here, cutting some there, before he heard a crackle on the radio.

An idea flashed in him. He dialed into

a galactic radio station, one he knew by heart, one he'd recognize instantly. Moving with purpose back to the wires, he positioned them one way, then another, again and again and again. Until he heard it:

A riff. The strumming of an electric guitar filled the rover, as did Clyde's joyous screaming. The comms were working now. His adrenaline was raging. He swung up to the driver's seat and leaned into the speaker, but he stopped. *They* were close. A column of red dust flew across the Martian sky like the banners of a calvary. Clyde switched to an open COUNET line that would be heard by most channels. He had to be fast, they would pick up the transmission.

"Hailing all frequencies. Hailing all frequencies. I am stranded on a plateau with Martian insurrectionists imminent. I need evac. ASAP." He spoke quickly and clearly. "There's maybe a dozen or more men on my location. Transmitting coordinates now."

Clyde set the message to repeat and darted back to the weapons in the floor cabinet. He pried open crate after crate and laid out the weapons before him. If he wanted to stand a chance, Clyde would need every single round the militia bought for themselves. He knew the rover was the one advantage he had. Clyde figured part of the delivery was not just the weapons, but the rover too, so they would do their best not to damage it. After spreading different weapons in easily accessible locations, Clyde took extra caution to

neatly stack each explosive in a strategic location.

As he was finishing his preparations, Clyde heard the rumble of engines nearby. His head shot up, and as he looked out the window, he gave a half smile. Only two. There were only two trucks out there waiting. They wouldn't expect him to have opened the floor safe. They don't know what he has prepared for them.

Outside of the rover, two older models of similar vehicles to his were parked on each side of Clyde. Three men got out of the transport that was in his line of sight, making four in each car. *Eight*. He thought, *eight is manageable. It's not a dozen*. He tried to make out the weapons they carried. Two men had small carbines, and the other a marksman rifle. He assumed the driver had at least a pistol, and Clyde hoped nothing larger. As the soldiers aimed their rifles at the rover, one man spoke up using an intercom.

"Exit the vehicle." His voice was harsh and he spoke through a thick Martian accent. His vowels were sharp, and consonant clusters slurred. The Martian spoke again, "Exit the vehicle or we *will* use deadly force."

Clyde knew this was risky. Was there a chance they'd let him live? *No*. He knew these people, and whoever's supplying them, don't leave loose ends. They would only avoid damaging the rover for so long. Clyde spoke into the device on his wrist, which was connected to the speaker attached to the outside of the rover.

"Hold on." Clyde was never the most

eloquent. "I know you men need what's in this rover. I *do not* give a shit about this equipment. You give me what I need, I give you what I need."

No response.

"I have a daughter. I have a daughter on Earth, and I'd like to spend Christmas with her. I let you leave with the weapons, and you leave me out here with a beacon, or anything at all so I can make it back." No response. Clyde could hear boots hitting the dirt. The soldiers were moving. *Positioning*. It was time to put the cards down, he cleared his voice and spoke with force. "I need a guarantee, or this whole fucking rover goes up in smoke." Clyde then heard a voice commanding the men to halt. *Good*, he had their attention.

"I've stacked every single explosive on here next to the gas tank. It's on a timer. It does not matter to me if you get these weapons. But please—" His voice broke. He choked it down to avoid showing how scared he truly was. "Please let me see my daughter again."

There was silence.

Hesitantly, Clyde lowered the hydraulics and opened the side door. He was sure to obscure the weapons from sight. A camera attached to the rover allowed him to view a portion of the outside.

"Door's open. I want you to send one man, *unarmed*, in here to verify everything I've told you." Even Clyde himself was unsure how much he was bluffing. He saw men from the other side march to the transport in front of him to discuss his

offer. He had them all in sight now. *Yeah, you fucking idiots*, Clyde thought, *Let me see each of you.*

Clyde waited as the men discussed their strategy. He was sure they'd take the first opportunity to finish him off, despite how cooperative they may seem. At an order, the soldiers all pivoted and aimed their rifles at the rover. A heavily armored one stepped forward and spoke out of his intercom. "We are sending a man in, unarmed."

Clyde knew that was bullshit.

Slowly, one of the soldiers laid his rifle down, raised his arms in the air, and then walked forward. Each step he took was followed by a small cloud of dirt exploding from his steel boots. He was hesitant, maybe even scared. Clyde waited until he was within ear shot and spoke up.

"I'm in the cockpit of the vehicle. I will be armed, but I will not be drawn." He spoke with uneasy authority. He had to use the leverage while they still believed he had it. "Enter the vehicle through the door, turn to your left, and you will see the explosives stack to the backside of the floor-safe."

Clyde heard the footsteps stop in front of the door. He could hear the soldier's heavy breathing. The soldier put one foot inside the vehicle, and then the other. When he was fully inside the rover, Clyde was able to see his face.

It was the face of a child, no more than a few years older than Macy. He was scared. Shaking. Beads of sweat rolled down his face as his helmet fogged from

the exasperation. It was the face of a child sent to die in a war he had no choice in. Maybe this was the first time he had even seen someone who they called an enemy. Clyde saw a look he was all too familiar with in the child's eye. He saw the instinctual fear of death wrap its claws around the boy, whispering false paths to salvation.

Don't do it, Clyde thought to himself. *Don't fucking do it kid. Please.*

In a clumsy motion, the child reached down for a concealed weapon to draw on him. Clyde had already put the child in his sights though, and he needed to let him get at least one shot off, two ideally if he would be able to sell the idea that he was injured to the men who sent the boy to his death. Panicking, the child drew the weapon and fired a quick round off nearly missing Clyde, who'd gotten what he needed and fired one perfectly between the eyes. Clyde grabbed the child before he slumped back in view of the other soldiers. Preserving the illusion their ambush may have worked.

As Clyde waited for more soldiers to advance, he was forced to look in the empty eyes of this 14 year-old child with a hole in his head, put there by Clyde's own hand. The lifeless eyes floated around as Clyde struggled to hold on to the boy as he reloaded his carbine. Suddenly, he heard another command, and saw on the camera three more soldiers advancing.

When the men were within 20 meters of the rover, Clyde shoved the child's corpse out of the side door and used the

ensuing commotion to dart across the opening to the other end of the Rover. He grabbed and tossed two grenades towards the soldiers, and the explosions enveloped the men. Clyde heard a hail of bullets pounding against the side of the hull. He was out of tricks, but not ammo. He was still holding out hope the men wouldn't torch the rover completely, but he knew it wouldn't be long until the remaining four men cut their losses and send a rocket into the side of the vehicle. He was also aware that at some point the hull of the rover would fail, and bullets would begin to break through.

Using his wrist device still connected to the rover, he closed the side door as bullets continued to fly through. Clyde watched the hatch door close and launched himself towards the cockpit. Gripping the steering wheel, he pointed the rover towards the downward slope of rocks he came from, and prayed the tires would hold as he pushed the acceleration pedal to the floorboard.

The roar of the engine drowned out the hail of gunfire, and the tires spun for a brief second before the traction caught on the dusty red rock and propelled the vehicle forward. The surviving soldiers rallied in one of the transports and followed the cloud of dust left by Clyde and the rover. Two of the men leaned out of the militia's vehicle and took aim for rover's treads.

POP. One tire out.

POP. Another.

Clyde grabbed the wheel and cranked

it to counter the pull of the rover. The hull of the rover began to fail, as bullets from the militia penetrated the metal and danced around the cabin. Clyde needed the rover to make it fifty more yards to the rocks so he could even the odds with cover. As he was closing in, one of the marksmen took out the third wheel, sending the rover into a skid. Clyde tried to recover the best he could, but the rover's weight was too much. He felt the gravity shift within the massive vehicle and gripped the side of the seat as it rolled across the red dirt, slamming his skull repeatedly into the hull. As the tumble slowed, the rover slid to stop towards the cliff of the plateau.

The vehicle now laid on its side with Clyde suspended by his safety belt. He felt a deep pain in his shoulder and placed his hand on it, expecting perhaps to feel it dislocated. Instead, Clyde felt the warm rush of blood and recognized the stinging pain of a small caliber round lodged in his arm. He searched for the hole the bullet left in his exosuit and grabbed sealing foam from the center console to quickly patch the depressurizing suit. How much oxygen had he lost?

Hearing the soldiers close in, Clyde gripped the emergency release lever and watched as the cockpit windows were thrust into the air followed by a quick burst of exhaust. He awkwardly angled himself out of the rover while grabbing the weapons available: the company provided Marquette pistol, a modified shotgun, and a marksman rifle. Clyde only had the ammo that was loaded in each, and he

needed to be smart, which meant strategically leaving the explosives behind, but wouldn't let them go to waste. Before he exited the vehicle fully, Clyde quickly punched in some commands to a control panel on his right, and then pulled his final cigarette from his pouch. He didn't have time to savor it, but those small inhales relieved a little of the pain before he gently placed the lit cigarette by a small vent and dropped out of the turned over vehicle.

The crash was beginning to take its toll; the adrenaline failed to dull the pain. His body ached, and his vision began to blur. He had concussions in the past, but none that had felt like this. Climbing from the sideways rover, Clyde could feel the rounds whizzing past him. He examined the cliff the rover slid to, a few meters further and he wouldn't be feeling this concussion, or anything for that matter. Beneath the vehicle, the plateau transitioned into a steep slope peppered with boulders of different sizes. He saw a winding path descend the side of the plateau, which seemed to only be navigable with extreme caution. Clyde knew he did not have time to take it.

Looking back at the pursuing soldiers, Clyde's only real option was in front of him. He slung the rifle onto his back and gripped the shotgun tight. Positioning himself on the ground gently but quickly, he slid down the face of the plateau until he reached a bundle of boulders large enough for cover. Immediately, he

positioned his rifle upon the rock and waited for the soldiers, aiming towards the edge of the cliff he began on.

Clyde listened carefully but became frustrated with the sound of his own breathing. It was heavy, too heavy to be an effective shot. How long was that hole in his suit? How much oxygen did he have left? He heard the brakes of the transport come to a halt, and men exiting the vehicle. Clyde was hoping they didn't realize he had climbed out of it yet and would position themselves out in the open around the rover. The front of the vehicle was in his sight, and if he could just wait for....

There. As a soldier rounded the front end to flank the driver's side, Clyde cracked a shot that pierced the helmet of the insurrectionist, and he fell limp into the rocks, almost sliding down as gently as Clyde did. The sound of the rifle gave away his position, but he was sure he still had an advantage for a short time.

3. Clyde thought, *3 men left. Or are they boys?* Clyde could not let the image of the dying child slow him down. He ducked behind the rocks as he heard the soldiers yell orders and approach the face of the cliff. There was more cover to his left and right, but he needed to draw them directly beneath the rover if this was going to work.

Clyde heard the soldiers tepidly begin testing the decline of the face of the plateau. He pivoted around quickly and fired his rifle at the first separatist he could put between his sights. It didn't need to be a good shot, just enough to throw one of

them off balance. Clyde's shot bounced off the ground next to one of the men, which sent one of them tumbling forward and downward. While their comrade smashed against the rocks on his way down, the other two soldiers took aim at Clyde's position. The courier felt the vibrations of their bullets chipping away at his cover. The sound of steel smashing against stone shook Clyde's helmet, rattling his already pulsating skull.

The falling soldier skidded to a halt mere meters away from Clyde. The soldier writhed around trying to stand up and draw his weapon simultaneously. Clyde swung around the sawed-off shotgun attached to his back and blew a hole through the helmet of the insurrectionist, taking a portion of his skull off as well.

2 left.

Clyde waited for a lull in the gunfire and rose from his position to see one of the soldiers reloading while the other was waiting for Clyde to show his face. Realizing he had been baited, Clyde raised his marksman rifle and exchanged rounds with the soldier. A bullet ripped through the soldier's stomach as he fell back towards the rover. *Not dead*, Clyde thought, *not dead yet.*

He turned his rifle to the final soldier who was scaling the decline more gracefully than his fallen brother. Clyde had him sighted in, but the piercing pain in his head and the blurring of his vision resulted in him wasting several rounds of ammunition until he heard the *click* of the empty magazine. The rifle was finished.

Clyde crouched back behind his cover and tried to refocus. He pushed the pain in his shoulder and head out of his mind, and reached for the Marquette pistol that was provided to him. He had to make these shots count.

The final soldier slid down to the rocks parallel to Clyde. He had learned from his squadmate's mistake. Using the cover just as Clyde did, the soldier poked his rifle out between two rocks and fired on the courier's position. Clyde rolled to the other side of the boulders to better position himself out of range. He was worried. He needed that soldier closer.

He waited. If the soldier thought he was injured or out of ammo, the odds of him approaching were better. Clyde wasn't sure how much time he had left until his plan came to fruition, but it couldn't be long, and he can't control time. After minutes that seemed like hours, Clyde heard the careful shuffle of boots. He brought his pistol to his chest, preparing to spring out. He needed him just a little bit closer. As Clyde listened carefully, the soldier stopped. *No*, Clyde thought, *Keep coming.* The soldier was still.

Clyde was trapped. He had maybe less than a minute before he needed to get the militant in the right position for his grand plan to work. He realized he would have to grab the soldier and bring him over himself. With this realization, Clyde sprung out of his position and rounded his cover. He got lucky. The soldier was fiddling with what looked like a grenade. He wasn't sure if was the kind that

exploded or disoriented you, either way if he would have waited any longer, he would have died. The soldier dropped the unarmed munition on the ground and aimed his rifle at the charging Earthman.

Clyde used his good arm to draw the pistol on the center of the man and fired. Miss. Clyde pulled the trigger again. Miss. Twice more Clyde aimed and could not hit the man just 20 meters from him. His vision, the pain in his body and head, it was too much to make an accurate shot. He had to get closer. All he could feel was his body exerting its last well of energy to keep him alive. Not the recoil of the pistol, not the ground beneath his feet, and not the body of the soldier as he slammed into him and knocked the rifle out of his hands. Maybe the soldier had shot him once, or even twice. He couldn't tell. It didn't matter though, he had closed the distance to the soldier and that's what was needed.

The two men wrestled each other. Clyde was weaker than him, and they both knew that. As the soldier pummeled him relentlessly, Clyde grabbed a stun grenade off the belt of the soldier and tossed into the air directly above his assaulter to detonate. A white, hot, ball of blinding light assaulted the two men. Disoriented and screaming, the insurrectionist had lost his grip on Clyde, who was suffering from the effects of the ordinance as well.

Clyde tried to lift himself off the ground, but his leg repeatedly buckled under him, and his arm failed to support the fall. In half-crawl-half-limp, he dragged

himself back to the boulders that had earlier provided him cover. The soldier was after him now. Clyde propped himself up against the rock, waiting for the man to reach him. Shakily, Clyde raised his pistol up, but it was swiftly knocked away from him by the soldier who was standing before him, panting. Clyde could see the furrowed brow and the flared nostrils from inside of his helmet.

Clyde laughed. He wasn't sure why. But the thought of this angry fanatic standing before him amused him.

"You think this is funny?" the soldier said, leaning down and grabbing Clyde by the collar of his exosuit. "You're fucking dead." The soldier followed this remark with a fist deep in Clyde's gut. Then another, and a swift kick to the groin. "You should have made this easy. You shouldn't have killed those men. Your stupid little bluffing game with the rover, your pathetic little chase. All for nothing," as the Martian spoke, Clyde stared at his reflection in his helmet. "You're not dying here," the stranger's voice was panicked and agitated, "I am going to make you suffer, and I'm going to send your little girl the video."

Clyde shook his head and tried to wheeze out some final words. "I didn't..." Speaking hurt. Breathing hurt. "I didn't..."

"You didn't want to?" The soldier laughed. "It's too late. You murdered a *child*."

"No." Clyde was able to smile, and he hoped the other man could tell. "I didn't bluff."

At that moment, a lit cigarette Clyde had placed by an exhaust vent had finally made contact with the oxygen pouring from the rover's reserve tanks, and the resulting fireball detonated the remaining explosives stockpile left behind. The blast shook the entire plateau as a cloud of red dirt filled the air. Boulders and chunks of machinery hurled themselves down towards the injured men in a crimson avalanche. They were quickly enveloped by burning steel and rocks. Clyde saw what he thought was a part of the axle of the rover pierce the helmet of the soldier standing above him before the debris of the hillside smothered him.

#

Clyde awoke to the sound of sharp beeping. His eyes opened and he saw the Martian sunset painting the landscape with a crisp orange hue. He couldn't move his left arm to check his vitals status, but he had to guess the noise was an oxygen alert. He figured 2% of the tank left was being optimistic. His vision was still blurred, but his head no longer ached. The concussion seemed to move beyond pain, and now his head felt light, numb even. It reminded him of the first time he stole his brother's smokes. He examined his surroundings and found burnt metal and parts of the plateau scattered around him. He tried to move his legs but a small boulder, one which he probably would have been able to free himself from at full strength, assured he would stay put. Clyde thought not many men were fortunate enough to have their legs crushed by boulders twice in their

lifetime.

Within reach of his right arm, however, was that shiny company provided Marquette pistol. If he could have shot straight, it may not have resorted to this. He reached out and grabbed the pistol. He knew there was at least one bullet left. Putting one through his helmet would be a quicker death than suffocating on the atmosphere of a hostile planet.

I'm sorry. He thought to himself. *I'm sorry Macy. I tried. I really did.* He thought of her future. He figured the insurance payout would make a nice college fund. Maybe even get her a nice car in a few years. He knew his mother wouldn't let her drive that truck around.

Clyde let out a broken scream. He wasn't worried about preserving oxygen anymore. He gave everything he had left in one final lament for his daughter.

The tears rolling down Clyde's cheek cooled him. In all the action he didn't realize how hot he was. The temperature, wherever he was, may kill him quicker than the injuries if he didn't run out of air first. Either way, he knew a bullet was quicker. He raised his eyes to the sky, and in a delirium caused by a mix of heat-stroke, head trauma, and lack of oxygen, he saw a bright blue glass bird painted against the red sky. Clyde smiled. He raised the pistol close to his helmet; he wouldn't miss this time.

#

Macy stared out of the window into the blackness. This late in the year, it got dark early. She always hated that.

Countless evenings had been spent staring out this same window, eyes fixated down the road as far as her eyes could make it. On clear summer nights, she could see far. She could see late into the night. But on winter nights, it got dark too early. She couldn't see cars coming down the road, or people and animals who would sometimes walk along it. When it snowed though, that was a period of brief respite. The crystal snow blanketed the countryside like an angelic mirror reflecting the moon.

She could see far tonight. Even through the snow still falling, the full moon illuminated everything. Her grandmother tried to temper her expectations. Tried to lure her away from the window with music and television.

"It's Christmas night Macy-lady," said the grandmother. "We can get a fire going, play some tunes..."

But it didn't matter, nothing mattered right now, not even her unwrapped presents. Macy *really was* excited to read her new books and try on some new dresses that her grandma clearly told her father to get her, but it was *Christmas Night*. She wouldn't blame him if he couldn't make it. She promised herself she wouldn't. She won't break a promise. It's not right to.

"Well suit yourself then," said the older woman raising her arms in resignation. "If you don't want to choose a song, then *I* will."

With her eyes still fixated on the road, Macy heard her grandmother try to get the music going. Despite being born well into

a time where digital music was the norm, her grandmother's rural upbringing led to some obstacles when trying to play any music. After a minute of hearing her grandmother curse, Macy finally resigned herself to do some service to the elderly.

"Here," Macy said, walking over and sticking her hand out. Her voice was still flat. "Let me see."

Her grandmother smiled, knowing she won a small battle by prying the girl's misty eyes away from the window. "Well, if you think you can figure it out, be my guest." She knew she could.

"What's the song called?" Macy asked.

"Vienna," said her grandma. "By a Mr. Billy Joel."

Macy's fingers swiftly brushed over the device, and a soft piano began to ring out inside the farmhouse. As her grandma began to hum, Macy marched over to a fat lump of orange fur and hoisted him off the hardwood floor, interrupting his bath. She found a chair where she could keep one eye out the window, but her eyes lost focus as her mind drifted and she clung to the cat.

She heard her grandmother hum to the lyrics.

*But you know that when the truth is told
That you can get what you want
Or you can just get old*

She thought of their last day together. She yelled at him. She was mean. She made him feel bad. *Stupid*. Macy thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. She just wanted him. It's her own fault, she thought. It's because she asked for those stupid birds. She

wanted to run home through snow and smash all those stupid little things into bits. She just wanted him home. She just wanted her dad.

Slow down you crazy child

Take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while

It's alright, you can afford to lose a day or two

When will you realize... Vienna waits for you?

Her eyes welled with tears. The lump grew in her throat. She imagined her dad standing in the room, telling her not to cry. That usually helped, but this time it made it worse. She gripped the cat tighter. The orange feline made a squeak and leaped out of her arms and ran to the window. Macy looked up through moist eyes and saw nothing but farm dogs running in circles, launching white powder from the ground into the air. They barked, and barked, and barked, and Macy just wanted them to stop. *Just shut up.*

Her grandmother could tell it was upsetting her and approached the door. She swung the door open and stuck her head out to curse the dogs before she stopped suddenly. Macy heard a noise. Like an airplane, but closer, and smaller. She looked up to her grandmother, who had been looking at her with widened eyes.

Both women darted out of the house. Instead of down the road, Macy looked up into the sky. Circling the farmhouse was a small, bright cobalt shuttle. It was older, Macy could tell from her limited exposure to her father's work, but in good condition. *Was this him?* Macy wondered. *Where is his truck?* Why didn't he call

grandma from the spaceport? Macy knew this was not normal. *Something is wrong.* Her grandmother's reaction made it worse.

As the craft touched down, the wind blew the snow back, forming banks and lining Macy's hair with damp crystals. She wanted to get closer, but her grandma's hand reached out and gripped her shoulder tight.

"Stay here Macy," her grandma said in a shaky, stern voice as she felt the matron's nails dig into her skin. Her grandmother's eyes did not meet her own, but stayed fixated on the blue shuttle, and the man exiting the cockpit.

Macy recognized him. From pictures maybe. Was he an uncle? No, she knew he had passed away. A cousin? A neighbor? She was unsure.

The man held papers in his hand.

"Fredrick," her grandmother's voice trembled across the lawn. "Fredrick, what are you doing here?"

He was silent for a moment. "Beth, I—" He started to speak but the older woman cut him off.

"Wait." She turned to Macy. "Macy, you stay right here." Her voice was shaking. Macy had never seen her like this. She obeyed and stayed frozen in the snowy field as her grandmother crossed over to the somber man. Macy couldn't make out what they were saying but she saw the older woman raise her hand and slap the familiar man across the face. She jutted a bony finger into his chest, and he threw his hands in the air, and then pressed them forward to gesture to her to calm down.

Macy felt the snow melt into her shoes. Her feet were cold, but her insides felt cold too. She noticed her breath in the air like a ghost watching her. She felt her heart. She wondered how long she had been breathing this fast.

Her grandmother pointed towards the gulf-wing door of the shuttle. The familiar man reached inside his cockpit door and flipped a switch. Before the door opened, she saw a ramp descend from the side, as if men needed to load or unload something heavy from it. Her grandmother paced back and forth as the gulf wing door mechanically lifted itself open. Before it was even fully open, her grandmother ran up the ramp, and ducked under the door as it was still opening. She heard a scream, but it wasn't her grandma's normal scream. It wasn't angry, and it wasn't surprised. It was sad, and scared. When the door was finally done obstructing her view, she saw her grandmother sprawled over the body of a man. The familiar man walked over to the older woman and lifted her off the body of the man.

Macy wasn't sure when she started running. She wasn't sure if the wetness on her cheek was snow or tears. She wasn't sure if the sound coming out of her mouth was a sob, a scream, or something in between. She wasn't sure what was said between the familiar man and her grandmother. She was sure though, that the man her grandmother had been on top of, was now sitting up. He was being helped into a wheelchair, he looked through the snow falling in the night air,

and he saw her.

She was sure he was trying to get on his feet, and the familiar man was stopping him. She was sure that he threw that familiar man off, and he got up out of the wheelchair, and stumbled down the ramp, and fell into the snow. He was reaching for her, and she was reaching for him. She was sure this man was her father.

She crashed into him and embraced the warm body. For the first time, *she* was holding *him*. The man who was strong enough to pick her up and throw her in the air no matter how big she was. She felt the weight of her father for the very first time. She felt his tears on her neck, and he felt hers. They were warm.

Macy was finally close enough to hear the conversation between the familiar man and her grandmother. They were smiling now.

“-the most I've seen since we found him. We weren't sure if he'd make it. Found him pinned under some rocks with a pistol full of blanks. Not sure who gave him those, but I just thank god he sent that transmission.” The familiar man mentioned something about a “full investigation,” but Macy turned her attention back to her father. Who was still kneeling in the snow, collapsing into her arms.

Clyde's breath was heavy. “Macy.”

She let out a sob. She heard his voice for the first time again. She felt him adjust his body and reach for a small bag he had buried in his coat pocket. He pulled out a small jumble of paper and began

unwrapping it. He took the contents, and handed it to Macy, who had in her hands a little blue glass bird.

“Merry Christmas.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION